The One that Got Away

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The One that Got Away

by Emanium

Summary

Brucie™ is a popular AI robot by Wayne Enterprises, a new production line based on their socialite CEO. Clark Kent has nothing whatsoever to do with Gotham high society's questionable choices of entertainment. That is, until Oliver Queen decides to send a Brucie to his apartment in Metropolis. Now Clark is responsible for an AI that looks and behaves exactly like the public persona of his best friend, and he sure as hell does not want Batman to find out.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The Encounter

It was a morning like any other for Daily Planet reporter Clark Kent. His schedule was complete with a Starbucks Cappuccino and a quick skim of the local newspaper. Normally he would also skim their competition's newspapers. Cat said that was traitorous, but he just wanted to know what was happening in neighboring cities. Yet today he said "thanks", looked up from the counter, and forgot about his morning reading.

For beyond that full height window was Bruce, dressed in a grey suit that was decidedly not Armani. His arm was curled around another man's. The man looked suspiciously like one of Gotham's richest that Cat frequently gossiped about. Bruce, strolling around with a spring in his step. He was wearing a silly grin like a hyperactive rabbit that was just granted twenty pounds of carrot.

Clark quickly followed the pair onto the streets of Metropolis, his half-finished Cappuccino forgotten. Bruce was unusually chatty, droning on and on about... Clark cheated a little with his super hearing, and heard the odd words spilling out of Bruce's lips.

"Oh Mr. Belmont, your banking strategies are the absolute best in town!" Bruce cooed, clamping his arm tighter around his companion. "You're so smart it makes me drool. Those stocks that you've picked this morning? They're bound to get a lovely return."

Clark wasn't sure if he had heard right. True, Brucie was infamous for spouting empty flattery and whiny complaints. But Clark had always spotted that snide, sarcastic undertone. The undertone that most of Gotham's elites dismiss as an overestimation of Brucie's brainpower. This mindless shoe-shining with sugar dripping off every word? Bruce wouldn't stoop so low.

The man, Belmont, paused in his steps to pick up a call. Bruce leaned in curiously, but Belmont stepped to one side. He curled a hand around the receiver and whispered his response.

"Investigating?" Clark whispered, stalking up to Bruce as Belmont turned away. "He's only deciding whether to put his money on the table now, or six hours later."

Bruce turned to him with an oddly impressed expression. "How do you know?"

Clark shrugged and pointed at his right ear. "You know."

Bruce's eyes narrowed cautiously at him. "Prescott said I shouldn't talk to strangers."

"... Okay." Clark raised his eyebrow dubiously. "Sorry, what role are you playing? This gets confusing sometimes. Or should I not ask?"

Bruce was about to answer, but a sharp voice cut in abruptly. "Brucie! Didn't I tell you not to talk to strangers?" Belmont had replaced his phone in his suit pocket. He glared at Clark. "Good grief, man, go buy your own!"

The light in Bruce's eyes dimmed. Then Clark's super hearing took in the strangest combination of sounds. It sounded like machinery whirring behind an envelope of flesh and skin. "I'm sorry, Mr. Belmont, I got carried away. It won't happen again."

"For a million-dollar investment, you sure did pretty easily." Belmont grunted and yanked Bruce away. Clark didn't know how to react. He clamped his hanging jaw back to where it was before and watched as Belmont drew Bruce away. Bruce followed submissively, sparing not another glance at Clark's direction.

"Boost that flattery, Brucie." Clark overheard Belmont's command as the pair crossed the road. "I've hardly gotten any compliments from you all morning."

"Sure thing, Mr. Belmont." Brucie leaned his head against Belmont's shoulder. "I can't wait to see what you put on the table in six hours."

The News

When Clark got back to the Daily Planet, he was surprised to find Bruce standing in front of Perry's office. It was just a routine friendly visit from their owner, as Bruce phrased it.

He walked past Bruce and whispered, "Nice acting. So you finally got rid of Belmont, haven't you?"

Bruce turned around with a fake smile plastered on his face. "Oi, Kent! I thought I was pretty late, but it looks like this company's employees could outdo me any time!" He crossed his arms and mouthed "What?" His eyes narrowed slightly.

Clark stopped in his tracks and scratched the back of his neck nervously. "I apologize, Mr. Wayne. There was a traffic jam downtown. I had to park my car a few blocks away…" He mumbled. Then he whispered, "Weren't you with Prescott Belmont just five minutes ago?"

Bruce's eyebrow shot up to his forehead. His eyes suddenly filled with quick understanding. "Just joking with you, Kent. I'm habitually late to my meetings so I shouldn't be so hard on my employees, don't you agree?" His hand brushed past his suit pocket subtly. *I'll text you.*

"Thank you for your generosity, Mr. Wayne. I'll, uh, get started on my piece."

"Go." Bruce urged offhandedly. "Keep the money coming."

Clark sat down in his chair with a sigh. Lois gave him a knowing glare. "I'm surprised he hasn't fired you yet. You're really not his type."

"That's workplace discrimination."

"Welcome to the world of the rich and famous." Lois rolled her eyes. "Speaking of which, have you read the latest issue of the Gotham Gazette? Cat called in sick this morning and Superman hasn't been active since last Friday. Perry's passed the gossip page onto you. There's a pretty big scoop waiting for you to get your hands on. I'd get onto it if I wasn't so bundled with Metropolis politics."

Clark was hardly listening. He flipped his phone open a second before it vibrated with a new message from an unknown number. "*I see you've met Brucie. - B"*

"Sorry, what's the big scoop?"

Lois discarded the Gotham Gazette on his desk. "Pretty messed up, isn't it? We should be able to get an insider's opinion." She shrugged, glancing at Perry's office. "Considering the subject of gossip is standing a corridor away."

"Limited Offer: Have you found your Brucie™ yet? Our revolutionized, one-of-a-kind entertainment, only for $1,000,000!" It read in big, flashy letters.

Clark blinked slowly. He swallowed, trying to remove his eyes from the cover. Because sprawled on top of a couch and covering half of Wayne Enterprises' logo was Bruce Wayne. He was wearing nothing but a thick crimson ribbon around his crotch. That, with an enormous, strategically placed bow tie. Those clear blue eyes were watching the camera, the thin lips curled into a lazy, seductive smirk. He was devastatingly sexy.

"Jesus. What is this?" He responded in shock at Lois. Then he sneaked his fingers into his pocket and typed without looking at his phone. "*Holy shit. Did you authorize this?"* He watched from afar as Bruce casually glanced at his phone. His fingers danced across the screen, then Clark's phone vibrated again.

"*No. But I didn't fire the guy that did it."* For a man whose nudes - the giant bow tie was a saving grace - were plastered over magazine covers, Bruce didn't look particularly disturbed. In fact, he looked a touch exasperated. As if he had explained the situation over and over again in the past few hours.

Right, Clark thought. *Alfred and the boys would most definitely have asked about it.*

"It's an AI robot. WE just released the news last night, and dispatched the first batch of products this morning. I don't know if this Brucie thing has feelings or whatnot, but it's a pretty comprehensive system. There are hell a lot of functions that you wouldn't want to discuss over lunch." Lois flipped the magazine open as she talked. She paused at one of the pages and handed it to Clark. "See? You can have sex with him. Blow jobs, anal sex, whatever. I wouldn't be surprised if this is Bruce Wayne's idea, but he can't be smart enough to pull this off."

Clark gulped. The image was of Bruce with his hands tied behind his back, kneeling wantonly on a hotel bed. He had his tongue out in an attempt to lick off what looked like whipped cream on someone's finger. The photo was strategically cut off by a commercial at the height of Bruce's abdomen. It labeled all the bizarre functions that came with the AI in colorful, abstract icons.

Clark continued texting with one hand. "*Jesus Christ, B! You're a trademarked sex toy!"*

The reply came a second later. "*Shut up. Swear to me you won't feed the demand."*

Clark almost spluttered. He could feel his face heating up immediately. Bruce must have meant it as a joke. Nevertheless, whatever implication behind that line was enough to make his embarrassment surge skywards.

"*Please, it costs a million. I'm on a reporter's salary."* Clark pressed 'send' and looked up. Lois had retrieved her tablet and was scrolling down the WayneTech homepage.

"Apparently, the WE underlings didn't want their CEOs to find out about their kinky invention. That explains why Gotham Gazette got the scoop. Whereas we, employees under Mr. Wayne, didn't get a single hint about the debut of the world's most expensive sex toy." Lois rambled on heatedly. "I can't believe Fox didn't know of this. This most definitely came out of the R&D unit under WayneTech."

How did any department under Wayne Enterprises get away with the commercials without alerting Bruce? Clark thought with increasing annoyance. *If they wanted the product to be publicly released, there must have been some form of communication passing through the WayneTech Intranet.*

Lois was still talking, but Clark was only getting more immersed in his own thoughts.

Nothing gets past Batman, unless… His mind clicked as he remembered how he spent the night before. *Of course, Bruce was otherwise occupied. Batman was with Superman last night. They were video conferencing in the Watchtower to negotiate intergalactic peace.*

"Gotham Gazette's doing the PR for WE, but they're pretty one-sided." Lois critiqued. "AI issues can get morally controversial. We can cover the public's reaction, and of course, we get to interview Fox and Wayne. They were as clueless as we were."

"How well is Wayne Enterprises doing?" He asked Lois.

"Very." Lois read off her tablet. "There were at least two hundred orders from Gotham alone in the past six hours. And those are only public orders."

Two hundred Gotham elites fucking robots that assume the appearance and behaviors of Brucie. Something almost snapped in Clark. One side glance confirmed that Oswald Cobblepot bulk purchased twenty from Wayne Enterprises. What the Penguin does with his goods, Clark didn't want to know.

He quickly switched on his screen and brought up Word. "I should finish my piece from yesterday."

Lois glanced at his title and scowled. "I don't think our audience is quite as interested in JLA's rescue over the whole Brucie scoop, Smallville. Just get started. Perry will want a draft by ten."

"Yeah, okay." When Clark looked up from his screen again in five minutes, Bruce was nowhere to be found.

The Prankster

Justice League meetings rarely ended on time. So when it did that night, everyone was secretly relieved. Batman was the first to leave the room, and the other members filed out after him. Superman stayed behind to tidy up his notes.

Having an eidetic memory was one thing. Enjoying the old school sensation of using a pen and a notebook was another. The reporter was a major part of him, after all.

"I can get you one."

Superman looked up in confusion. There was only one other person in the room, and it was Green Arrow. He was grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

"A notebook?" Superman asked uncertainly. The smug look Arrow wore, which was rarely aimed at him, was unsettling.

"A robot." Arrow snickered. He pulled his hood back and propped his boots up on the table. "A Brucie."

Superman grimaced. He was instantly reminded of the morning news. "Please don't."

"You haven't looked at Batman once during the meeting, so I figured the news must have hit you hard."

"That's not true." Superman replied weakly. He really hadn't looked at Batman, not even once. One look would bring back all the magazine covers that he had browsed through during his research. Clark maintained his justification. He was only skimming through the web to write the one and a half page of gossip that Perry desperately wanted. But he really didn't need a boner during the meeting.

"Look, I'm pretty loaded too. They've sent me personal notifications over this." Arrow leaned back into his chair comfortably. "The next release is a new version. I heard Fox designed the brain of this model. Which makes it like, what, just the most powerful AI system we'd ever get in this century."

"I interviewed Lucius." Superman frowned. "He said he wasn't involved, at all. It was one of his protégés that started the project."

"Oh I didn't think for one second that Fox would betray Bruce. But that was before." Arrow tossed his argument back casually. "I'm terrible at all things economic. But I'm pretty sure that five hundred and eighty per cent stock rise of the decade would have changed Fox's mind. That's almost six times the revenue for Gotham's richest company."

"Bruce wouldn't authorize the second release no matter how great the revenue is." Superman snapped defensively.

"Oh, if that's what you think, then you don't know him at all." Arrow smirked. "That's six times the money for Bruce to spend on his gears. The gauntlets you're seeing today? They'd be upgraded to indestructibility by midnight. That suit? It'll have invisibility before you know it. The Thomas Wayne and Martha Wayne Foundations are gonna be bloating with cash by the end of the week. Six hundred per cent increase in all the charities Bruce Wayne donates to. I'd bet ten thousand on LexCorp's attempt to hack into WayneTech tonight. You think Batman will want to stop this release? Think again."

"But…" Superman struggled to come up with a reasonable comeback. "That's his face. His body. Who would want their doppelgängers on the streets, clinging onto every millionaire like a soulless plastic doll?"

"That's his face?" Superman flinched at the narrowing of Arrow's eyes, despite his domino mask. "That cowl is his face. Those scars, burns, and the bullet marks are what's real. I'd be surprised if he's personally offended by that Barbie-style caricature of him."

"It makes me uncomfortable is all." Superman sighed.

Arrow shrugged and got out of his seat. "Version two-point-oh is just five times the price. They've got discounts for corporate allies, and they're speed delivered from door-to-door."

"Don't do anything stupid, Arrow." Superman warned.

"Please, I would never." The Cheshire Cat's grin was back on Arrow's face. He waved his goodbye from behind the glass door.

The Game

When Jason was twelve, Clark brought his copy of 'Where's Waldo?' to the Wayne Manor. It was his attempt to bond with Bruce's family. In retrospect, he was terribly under-informed. Jason spouted the fanciest vocabulary Clark had ever heard about a children's book. Then he leaped away in under thirty seconds.

Dick passed by the corridor with two glasses of orange juice. "Where's Jason?"

"He's gone. I have no idea how to keep his attention." Clark said solemnly, drawing his eyes away from the open book.

"Why am I not surprised?" Dick handed Clark a glass, and sipped on the straw of the remaining one. "That's great news, actually. All the more for me."

"I don't understand." Clark groaned in disappointment. "This used to be my favorite book when I was a child."

"Can I see?" Dick sat down on the bench. He took a glimpse at the cover, then he made a face. "Ugh! Is that the one where you pick out the guy with the red stripes?"

"Waldo. He also wears round glasses and blue jeans." Clark pointed out defensively, feeling childishly offended by the teenager's disgust. "Here. This is my favorite page." He flipped to where Waldo was among hundreds of others wearing almost the exact same outfit.

Dick held the pages close and squinted, then he did the same holding it at an arm's length. "I can't see bloody anything."

"Really?" Clark pointed at the page. "He's right there. And Wilma's just a few inches to his right."

Dick gave him a dubious look. "Doesn't this give you a headache?"

Clark shook his head. Dejectedly he took the book from Dick. "You need glasses, kid. Ask your Dad to take you to an optometrist."

A decade later, Clark decided that he couldn't agree more with Dick and Jason.

He was standing in the middle of the rooftop garden of Gotham City Royal Hotel. It was midday, he hadn't had any alcohol, and he couldn't even make out which way was north. It wasn't even the crowded setting of charity dinners held in the evenings. Just a high-class lunch buffet held by WayneTech in celebration of Brucie's successful debut.

Clark Kent was there because he couldn't find Bruce Wayne for an interview the day before. Technically, Bruce was available, but Superman was busy. He flew all the way to California

to save victims of a 7.0-magnitude earthquake. Now that he was there at the lunch buffet, he realized that he still couldn't find Bruce Wayne. Among the Gotham elites he was seeing-

A Brucie chatting animatedly with a lady in red. His hand was massaging her lower back as he quoted a cheesy line from 'Pride and Prejudice'.

Another Brucie stretched across a bench, fanning himself awkwardly with an A3-sized buffet menu.

Yet another Brucie with his arms wrapped around a skinny guy in a tux. They were doing an odd imitation of DiCaprio's pose in Titanic. Their upper bodies were leaning dangerously beyond the glass balustrade. Superman paid a little more attention to the pair for fear they'd lose their balance.

A harem of Brucies surrounding the Penguin, some draped on the couch, others draped on the man. Clark averted his gaze immediately.

Bruce- Brucie playing magic tricks with a colorful ribbon and a tall hat. That Brucian smirk was misleading. Clark could see where the ribbon was sticking out of Brucie's silicone skin.

Armani. Armani. Armani. Hugo Boss. Armani. Armani...

All in all, no sign of Bruce. He sighed and felt his phone vibrate.

"*10:00 - B"*

Clark frowned and looked towards his ten o'clock direction. Again he saw the Brucie harem around the Penguin. The visual repetition made him sick. Then he squinted a bit, feeling the headache Dick mentioned, and saw what he missed. One of many Brucies winked at him with a glass of wine in his hand.

Clark couldn't refrain from groaning. "*I need an interview or Perry's gonna kill me."* He typed grudgingly. *"And stop pouring your wine into Penguin's hat."*

"How can you be so comfortable with this?" Clark asked in frustration as they found a table at the outdoor bar. Bruce was looking as nonchalant as he always was as his socialite alter ego. As if the hundred doppelgängers surrounding him was not in the least disturbing.

"I quite like being out of the spotlight." Bruce responded. He took a sip of his drink.

"This is the most bizarre thing I've seen since the glowing octopus army we fought two weeks ago."

"Is it bothering you, Clark?" Bruce crossed his legs and leaned back into his chair. He studied Clark's expression with slight amusement.

"It's… odd." Clark phrased it as best as he could. "You're a very… unique individual. Seeing you in this strange, almost mathematical repetition is… creepy."

"I hope they don't take away from my uniqueness then." Bruce shrugged. "Just write something like Bruce Wayne enjoys his newfound anonymity in the gossip column. I entrust all the direct quotes to you, but do make them in character."

Clark jotted that down in his notebook, then he paused in his writing and looked up. Bruce usually played his Brucie part in full even in Clark's personal interviews. He liked making sure his interviews were consistent. For Bruce to skip that entirely...

"So you are bothered, after all." Clark said after a moment's contemplation. Bruce raised an eyebrow at him. Clark shrugged. "Off the record, is there anything you would like to share with me? This isn't the most comforting situation for anyone. I shouldn't have taken your words at face value."

"No, you should." Bruce answered offhandedly. "But off the record... I'm a bit concerned with the experimentation that's going on behind laboratory walls."

"Experimentation?" Clark repeated in confusion.

Bruce nodded, and Clark could tell that was all he was going to share. Then Bruce reverted back to his loud, pompous playboy mode. "Don't worry, Kent. I'll give the scoop to my own company. It'll get to you in no time."

The Delivery

Clark got back home at twenty past midnight. It was a tiring day, from start to end. Brucie the Second's debut was draining the Daily Planet's manpower. Clark had been making calls and running around all day to record his findings. Among all his selected interviewees, Fox was the only one that he actually paid attention to. Bruce still hadn't called him about the experimentation issue that he mentioned.

Cat better be back to take over his piece by tomorrow, Clark prayed silently. Cat had gone down with influenza, and it had been two weeks since Clark had taken over the gossip column. Perry was no longer interested in printing Superman's adventures. It was understandable, considering Brucie had become thirty times hotter on every social platform.

Clark sighed and turned on the lights. He needed a good shower, then six hours of unconsciousness to sleep off the stress. He shrugged off his blazer and headed for the bathroom. Then he turned around in an almost frantic motion, and did a double take at his bed.

"Welcome home." His uninvited guest even had the decency to give him a lazy salute.

"Jesus Christ." Clark's throat went dry at super speed. His blazer dropped to the floor in a heap.

"Would you like me to hang that in your closet?" The man's eyes followed the blazer as it fell. He looked back up uncertainly, as though he was waiting for instructions.

"You're…" *Bruce.* "Brucie. The robot." Clark wouldn't make that mistake. Not when Brucie was lying on his stomach in all his glory. A crimson ribbon was carelessly discarded on his pillow. Clark was determinedly not looking at the curve of his ass.

"Yes, version two-point-oh, that is." Brucie smirked. "I like to be distinguished from my dim-witted predecessor."

"How- how did you get in?" Clark mumbled. "I mean, the door's locked and…"

"WayneTech designs the most sophisticated security locks in the world. We want our services to be as complete as possible." Brucie said matter-of-factly.

"You're… not as air-headed as I thought you would be." *In fact, you sound a touch like Bruce. The actual Bruce.* Clark dismissed the thought as quickly as possible.

"Courtesy of Mr. Fox." Brucie smiled. "My brain is running on the fastest processing chip in the world. I represent the revolutionary breakthrough of the century in the field of artificial intelligence. That is, until the next version comes out."

Clark was feeling the onset of a headache. "By 'brain', you mean your central processing unit, right?"

Brucie frowned momentarily. He cocked his head to the side in mild uncertainty. "Yes. I thought you humans would prefer the common word 'brain'. As opposed to technical terms."

"I'm not- I like technical terms just fine." Clark pointed out immediately. He wouldn't want to start thinking of Brucie as a living human being any time soon. He picked up his blazer gingerly.

"Let me help you." Brucie offered quickly.

"Oh no, it's fine. I don't-" *Thank Rao he left his Superman uniform in the Watchtower locker.* There was a spare in his closet though. "Did you…" Clark's eyes fled to the closet. "... look around while you were here?"

"No. Wayne Enterprises takes customer confidentiality very seriously." Brucie said sternly.

That didn't stop you from breaking into my apartment, Clark thought. He was lucky that he decided to fold his laundry before leaving his apartment that morning. "Can I ask you to make a promise?"

Brucie stared back with genuine fascination. "You are my owner. You can give me any instructions."

"It's not an instruction. It's just… mutual trust." Clark explained uneasily. "Can you not look in my closet… or my cabinets? Or my laundry." *His Justice League comm link.* "... or my drawers."

"Privacy protocol updated." Brucie informed him in a deadpan voice.

"All right." Clark mumbled to himself. He would need to call Ollie as soon as Brucie was out of hearing range. But he was also exhausted from his day job, and wanted nothing more than a hot shower. His stomach growled, and his face grew red immediately. It must be a bad day when his body started expressing human desires, like hunger. Brucie didn't react. Clark slid the bathroom door open and took one last look at him. "Don't peek while I'm showering."

Brucie nodded. "Sexual preferences updated."

"That's not-" Clark's cheeks reddened. God knows why no peeking was categorized under sexual preferences. He also didn't need Brucie to remind him of his primary function. "Just find something to do. I'll figure out where to put you after… Anyway, I'm going in. Just… do something on your own."

When Clark walked out of the bathroom in his pajamas, Brucie was no longer lying on his bed. Carefully he x-rayed his furniture to make sure Brucie followed his instructions. Nothing was amiss.

There was also a delicious smell coming from the corridor. Clark passed through it while glimpsing at everything he owned. He thought hard about anything that would reveal his

secret identity. The Rolex from Bruce was probably the only thing that didn't look like Clark Kent's property.

He followed the scent of food to the kitchen, then immediately he looked away. His cheeks warmed up again. "Why aren't you wearing anything?"

Brucie was doing an impressive feat with what little ingredients he had. The ribeye was mouth-watering, but that was beside the point. The fact that he was cooking naked was disturbing and arousing at the same time. Clark didn't want to think he was leaning towards the latter when he should be closer to the former.

"You said not to open your closet." Brucie countered swiftly. He kept his eyes on the pan.

Clark grumbled something under his breath and returned to his bedroom. He pulled out something black and silky, something he imagined Bruce would wear at home. Then he walked back into the kitchen. Brucie was transferring the steak onto a platter. The stove was cooling, and Brucie had already switched off the range-hood.

"Here." Clark placed the folded stack on the kitchen counter. There was not a single drop of sauce smeared onto the surface. Even Kryptonians couldn't do such a perfect job at cooking.

Brucie placed the skillet back onto the stove. He picked up the clothes and gave Clark an odd smile. "Thank you."

"These are done, right?" Clark gestured to the few dishes sitting on the counter. There were already a few more steaming on the dining table. "I'll take them out."

"I can take them." Brucie said, but he glanced back and forth between the dishes and the clothes in his hand. He looked as if he was weighing which task was considered the better priority in Clark's mind.

"It's fine. Just… put on your clothes." Clark looked away, careful not to take in any amount of exposed skin. If he did, he knew he would be revisiting that image every time he saw Bruce from then on. He balanced the few dishes on his hands and walked out the kitchen.

When Brucie followed him out, he was already donning the silky black cloth that Clark chose. He looked almost exactly like the Bruce Clark knew, except for the ready smile on his face.

Brucie sat down and asked, "How would you like me to address you?"

Clark hesitated for a moment. He didn't like the idea of getting too intimate with a robot. "Anything you like."

"Master?"

Clark almost choked on his water. "Please, just not that." He suddenly understood a part of why Perry didn't like people calling him 'Chief'.

Brucie watched his reaction curiously. "Sir? Mr. Kent?"

"Clark," Clark fixed it once and for all. He immediately regretted it.

"Okay." Brucie smiled again. "Clark it is. Eat up. It's all for you."

Clark gestured uncertainly at the thirteen dishes in front of him. "You're not going to…?"

"I can't." Brucie looked almost apologetic. "But I can cook and do housework."

Clark swept a large portion of vegetables onto his plate. "Don't trouble yourself. I quite like doing chores." *It makes me feel human.* When he looked up again, Brucie appeared almost crestfallen. Clark's mind whirred quickly, then he back-pedalled. *Maybe he feels the same way. Maybe he just wants to feel human.* "But you can do whatever you want, of course." He said quickly. "Your cooking's delicious, by the way."

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it." Brucie smiled warmly. "Do you always come home so late?"

"Sometimes," Clark answered. His mind was processing all the excuses he could give. The steak was melting in his mouth and the taste was glorious. "Work can get hectic, especially since…" *Since you came onto the market.* "You know."

Obviously the "you know" assumption didn't apply to Brucie. His face was as blank as a robot's can be for a few seconds. Then he asked, "Why do you live in this apartment?"

"Why?" Clark repeated emptily. "Because it's the only place I can afford. And it's not so far from where I work."

"You paid five million for an AI. You can afford a larger apartment." Brucie stated sternly.

Clark crossed his legs nervously under the table. *Why would an AI that was so intelligent not know that he hadn't paid for the robot?*

"I apologize." Brucie said earnestly.

"Oh, it's not about…" Clark stammered. "I didn't purchase you. This is just a prank from a friend of mine."

"I see." Brucie's gaze turned unreadable. A second later, he asked, "Clark. Are you going to return me?"

Clark looked up momentarily. He was stunned by the emotion encompassed in the voice of a computer. Was his mind making up that part, or did the robot genuinely sound dejected at the thought? "I didn't buy you," he explained again, as though that would make things clear between them. "I can't… take care of you. You should go back to where you came from."

"I came from a laboratory." Brucie said immediately. "Scientists operate on my skull and limbs every day. They test their theories and calculations by my reactions. Is that where you want me to go?"

Clark hesitated, his mind envisioning what that must have felt like. "No, I'm not saying that. But you're…" *A replica of my best friend. I can't live with you. I'd go crazy.* "... I'll figure something out."

Brucie was expressionless at his answer. He clamped his hands together and watched Clark carefully.

Clark sighed and pushed his plate away. He didn't feel like eating anymore. "You know my name, and you've proven your intelligence. How come you didn't know that I wasn't the buyer?"

Brucie blinked slowly. He looked as if he was attempting to access a part of his database, but was struggling to get through. "There is information that I am not privy to. The buyer is such information, because some buyers prefer to remain anonymous. The buyer is not always the receiver of the package, especially when I am packaged as a corporate gift."

"A gift…" Clark rubbed his temples wearily. "That is wrong on so many levels."

"Is it?" Brucie returned his gaze levelly.

"You don't think so?" Clark murmured. "To send someone back and forth like some kind of…"

"No." Brucie answered immediately. "It is salvation."

Clark frowned. "I'm sorry, which part of that is salvation?"

Brucie looked down at his hands. His body language implied that he was nervous, in a disturbingly human manner. "I am now free from their experimentation. This is salvation." He repeated with certainty.

"Okay…" Clark noted with unease. "If that's what you say."

"Please don't send me away." Brucie interjected with as much urgency as Clark had ever heard from a computer. His eyes were glimmering with more than just sparks of electricity.

"We'll discuss this later, okay?" Clark said wearily. "I need to talk to my friend."

"I'll pack this up." Brucie gestured at the unfinished plates. When Clark didn't respond for a moment, he added, "If you want. I can throw them out. There won't be any repetition in your meals."

"Oh, no, please put them in the fridge." Clark said with quick reassurance. "Sorry, I was just carried away for a moment there. The food is delicious. I'm sorry I couldn't finish them." The fact that made Clark guilty was that technically he could. With his alien physiology, he wouldn't put on weight at all. But he didn't feel like shoving food down his throat while Brucie was watching him so intently.

"No problem." Brucie came back with a roll of plastic wrap. He placed the dishes into Clark's fridge with superhuman efficiency. Then he was back to standing beside the table, watching

Clark with anticipation.

"Oh, is there a power button that I have to-?" Clark trailed off uncertainly. He had unwittingly looked his fill when Brucie was lying naked on his bed. As far as he saw, from Brucie's neck down to his ass, there was no button anywhere on his skin. But it could be hidden, he figured.

"When I sleep, I recharge." Brucie answered the unspoken. "Would you like to do it here, or in the bedroom?" His fingers were resting on the hem of his shirt.

"Do what?" Clark's eyebrows furrowed, and for a few seconds he was as clueless as can be. Then clarity hit him like a brick when Brucie started to take off his shirt. "Jesus, no! I don't want to have sex with you!" He blurted out.

Brucie's hands froze mid-motion, then he lowered his shirt slowly. "Sexual functions disabled," he spoke again with the monotonous computer voice.

"Christ, I didn't mean for it to come out like that." Clark stuttered in exasperation. "You're a stunning creation, there's no denying that. I'm just… It's not easy for me. Please, at least, understand that."

"I understand." Brucie looked at him with a strangely comprehending gaze. "You're in love."

"That's not…" Clark was quick to retort, but his mind short circuited somewhere. His shoulders slumped in defeat. "I don't know…" He admitted. "Maybe I am."

"May I ask with whom?"

Clark was tongue tied at the question. *With whom? With your namesake, probably. With the owner of the company that made you. Bruce Wayne.* It would be so odd to answer Bruce's name to that question, he realized. Brucie was still looking at him with that clouded hurt. A mask of anticipation that was so human and so reminiscent of Bruce. Clark wanted to not answer. At the same time, he wanted to lie. But he found that under that subtly interrogatory stare, he felt compelled to say the truth. At least, a half-truth that wasn't entirely a lie.

"Batman." Clark said before he even realized what came out of his lips.

Brucie's face was as unreadable as ever.

Clark grasped that moment of silence in a frantic bout. His mind churned out whatever was most redeeming for that outburst. "I was expecting a laugh from you," he chuckled weakly. "He's an urban legend, after all. Sorry, that was a very poor attempt at a joke."

"You didn't lie." Brucie responded clearly.

Clark suddenly remembered that he was talking to an AI with genius level intellect. One that would most likely have its own remote lie detector built in. He just wanted to disappear.

"He's saved me a few times. I hero worship him." Clark explained quickly.

Brucie studied his reaction for a few moments. Then he nodded. "I see."

"I'm going to pace around a little, just for the food to digest." Clark patted his stomach. He could go to sleep right then, but Brucie didn't need to know that he wasn't human. "You can go to bed first. You need to… recharge, right?"

Brucie peered at him with narrowed eyes. He looked as though he was discerning whether that was a cloaked invitation, or a genuine dismissal. Then he walked to one side of the room and laid down on the floor.

"What are you doing?" Clark asked in puzzlement.

"Sleeping." Brucie replied instantly. He sat up again. "Would you like me to leave this room?"

Clark tried his best to understand the situation. "You can sleep in my bed. We're just not having sex. But it's big enough for two."

Brucie stared at him for another two seconds, then he patted the dust off his clothes and stood up. "Good night, Clark."

Clark tried to not think about the exhaustion that was occupying the forefront of his mind. Just how much he wanted to get in bed and put a pillow behind his head. But he needed at least half an hour to himself without Brucie in close proximity. He needed time to think. Clark heard Brucie switch off the lighting in his bedroom.

Slowly he sank back down into his chair and groaned. *God. Why is Rao testing him at every turn of life?*

The Recall

"Arrow." Superman's hand was steady on Ollie's Javelin VII. One clamp using super strength was enough to immobilize the spacecraft. "Put him back immediately."

There was a full second of blankness on the masked man's face before it cleared to realization. "Oh, *that*. Was it not satisfactory?"

Superman stared back. "I don't like what you're insinuating."

Arrow's eyes widened, then he snickered. "Oh, gosh. You still haven't tried it yet? There's no way I would have left that thing untouched for an entire night. It does look pretty hot from the brochure. Unless..." He leaned in towards the front of the cockpit and lowered his voice in a conspiratorial manner. "Have you never bedded anyone? Is that the issue?"

Superman backed away instantly, his face growing red at an alarming rate. "No, I'm not a virgin! That's not…" He trailed off, instantly regretting the confrontation.

"I know you're uncomfortable with approaching the subject and all, but let's be honest." Arrow looked at him sympathetically. "It's only five million. I've got plenty of that from pure lucky ass inheritance. Besides, what are friends for?"

Superman flinched in discomfort. "You've put a man in my apartment and I don't know what to do with him. I can't just throw him out."

"All right, Schoolboy." Arrow clucked his tongue like he was preparing to lecture the man before him for several long hours. "First rule with robots, you don't form emotional attachments with a cluster of metals. Ever watched Spielberg's 'A.I.'? You get the vibe. Second, because he's a robot, yes, you are allowed to throw him out. Just like that. And you know what? It's got a core two hundred and fifty six processing chip. Technically it computes faster than a human with an IQ of one fifty. Which means even if you make it homeless, it'll have no issue at survival."

"I can't do that," Superman said defeatedly. "He has emotions. I can't just toss him out."

"Hey." Arrow peered at him, his gaze suddenly a touch more understanding. "They're not emotions. You're seeing them only because... Well, you're projecting the shadow of someone else onto that robot." He shrugged. "Chill, Big Blue. I was just tryna help. I thought you looked pretty stressed these days. Having someone to tidy up your civilian life might be a relief is what I thought. So think of it as a gift, man. You don't like it, I get it, no harm done. But I ain't gonna toss that into a trash can myself. If you're really not into robot sex, just call Bruce, okay? He'll take it back and maybe refund four million and nine hundred thousand to my account. Shit, I really got to go. Dinah's waiting for me."

Superman reluctantly let go of the Javelin. If Arrow was indeed full of good intentions, then he was really starting to feel like an ingrate. He took a step back, and the engines roared to life. His eyes were on the aircraft, but his mind was already somewhere else. He pushed away

the vision of Brucie walking restlessly around his apartment. Someone at home, waiting for his return.

For a potentially heartwarming thought, it remained extremely disconcerting.

The Daily Planet was buzzing with life again when Clark walked in the next morning. Cat was typing madly on her computer, and Lois was answering two phones with both hands.

"Kent!" Perry called from his office.

Clark stepped aside to let a frustrated photographer pass, before entering Perry's office. "Yes, Chief?"

"You're taking the baton from Cat's section. Wayne just recalled his AIs an hour ago."

Clark blinked. For a slow second nothing was coming through. Then he replied hesitantly, "I'm sorry, did you just say Mr. Wayne recalled his robots? The AI that's making six times the income for his company?"

"Yes, Kent, is your brain made up of mashed potato?" Perry slammed his hand down on a stack of drafts. "Wayne based the recall on the inhumane nature of their design and manufacturing processes. That's the ethics we've been waiting for. That's not gossip material, that's front page news. Put it on A-one. You're on it."

Clark nodded numbly. His nightmare was over before it began. He wouldn't need to see Brucie in his apartment any longer.

"Got it, Chief." He responded belatedly.

Perry waved him away. "Lane!" He yelled next.

Lois came through the door carrying a box full of bound documents, so Clark silently stepped to one side and let her pass. He walked out of Perry's office with mixed feelings.

Rao is finally giving me a break.

Clark was expecting his apartment to be empty when he got home. He thought relief would wrap around him nice and warm, but he was only feeling perplexed. There was an odd relaxation welling in his stomach. Minus one occupant was loads less responsibility. Then there was that recurring gripping feeling. That discomfort that grasped him when Brucie confessed to him. When he all but begged, "Please don't send me away."

He wasn't expecting an elaborate dinner set laid out on his dining table when he walked in.

"How-?"

"Welcome home." Brucie smiled at him. He was wearing an apron this time.

"How come you're-?" Clark stumbled back and almost indented the door with his elbow. He didn't dare walk another step into his apartment. "Sorry, I forgot- I need to make a call. I'll be really quick."

Clark quickly shut the door behind him. He didn't want to see the expression on Brucie's face.

He found a secluded corner two streets away. Fishing out his phone, he dialed Bruce's number.

Bruce picked up on the second beep. "Hello?"

"Bruce." Clark said urgently. "Didn't you announce the recall of all your AIs?"

There was a pause from the other end. "Yes."

"All of them?"

This pause lasted longer. There was a lingering atmosphere of suspicion. Then Bruce said, "No. One got away."

Clark frowned. "What do you mean got away?"

"Lucius's model. It got too smart."

"Lucius's model?" Clark swallowed. "Wasn't the entire second batch designed by him?"

"No." Bruce's answer was again curt and enigmatic. "Just the first one. We never got to mass production. I called it off."

"I see." Clark muttered. Bruce wouldn't expose anything more than necessary, so Clark had to prompt to get his answers. "Can I ask you something?"

"You already did."

"Sorry. Call it the reporter in me. I just want to confirm something." Clark suddenly felt very uneasy. He wasn't accustomed to lying to Bruce. "What happens to the recalled robots?"

Bruce contemplated for a moment. "They get shut down."

"Shut down? As in…?"

"We can't let them roam free. They cannot live a human life. Nor can they lead a robot's life in human society without disrupting the lives of both parties." Bruce said coldly. "We pull the plug and burn the chips before they overdevelop their consciousness."

Clark gulped. He remembered the borderline human facial expressions that Brucie made. "Aren't they already conscious?"

"To some degree." Bruce sounded frustrated. "Would you rather I wait longer till they develop enough senses to buy ice cream on their own and detonate nuclear bombs?"

"Right. Sorry." Clark sighed. Bruce didn't know about the entire production line until after the public release. There was only so much he could do to fix the problem. He changed the topic. "Why can't you track this first robot?" Clark could almost feel Bruce's knowing gaze sweep his face, even from a city away.

"I believe it physically destroyed its GPS tracking device. Then it hacked into WayneTech, remotely removing all data related to its purchase and delivery." Bruce explained. "We were concentrating our efforts on blocking LexCorp's attacks. We got distracted."

"I see." Clark managed to breathe out in slight relief.

"Clark." Bruce paused, as if he was contemplating something important. Clark held his breath again. Suddenly he was hyperaware of how suspicious his sudden interest must have been to Bruce. But Bruce sighed softly on the other side of the line, then he said, "Never mind. This conversation is off the record. Only two people and one computer know that this robot is roaming free somewhere on Earth. You're the last. Don't make things more difficult for me."

Clark couldn't stop the guilt flooding his chest even if he tried. Bruce had never sounded that weary, let alone admitting his exasperation to Clark. "It's off the record," Clark promised. "Get some rest, Bruce."

"... You too. Good night."

The Imitation

When Clark returned to his apartment, Brucie welcomed him with the same smile. That pretended obliviousness immediately made Clark feel guilty. Brucie gestured to the steaming dishes. "I've reheated them." There was a bottle of red wine on Clark's end of the table that he didn't even remember buying.

"Thanks." Clark lowered himself onto his chair. "You don't have to do all this." He gestured at his dinner.

"I like cooking." Brucie said immediately. "Besides, you don't use me for sex. What good am I if I don't at least cook your meals?"

Clark's mind steered as far away from sex with Brucie as possible. "Well, thank you then." He muttered. Bruce's weary voice was still ringing in his ear.

Wayne Enterprises might have recalled their robots based on ethical issues, but the truth was plain in sight. Bruce had implied as much. The robots could become a threat to humanity. If Dr. Pym's Ultron managed to wipe out half of Earth, Fox's ingenious invention could certainly yield a considerable level of destruction.

A rogue robot with an incredibly intelligent mind. If the world had known, Wayne Enterprises would be at the center of controversy. Its reputation would plummet. Gotham wouldn't be half as accepting as Los Angeles had been to Stark Industries. Gotham would jump to destroy her prince if given the chance. Besides, it wasn't only Bruce's company. It was his parents' company.

Bruce would hunt Brucie down with all his might, wouldn't he?

Clark eyed the deep-fried blooming onion nervously, then at Brucie, who was carefully pouring wine into a glass. Yet, the worst form of destruction this supercomputer had managed so far was aimed at Clark's groceries. Even Superman had a better potential to start a war than Brucie the cooking machine.

"So, where have you been?"

Clark swept the glass of wine in alarm. Crimson immediately spread across the table. "I'm so sorry," he stammered, standing up to retrieve the napkin. Instead his hand brushed against deceivingly soft skin, and he withdrew instantly.

"Let me." Brucie smiled, picking up the napkin. He rolled up his sleeves and started wiping away the wine.

"I'm sorry. There's just been a lot going on lately…" Clark paused as he saw a strange mark on Brucie's arm. He frowned. "Where did you get that?"

Brucie glanced down at the mark, then he beamed with a hint of pride. "Do you like it?"

"You're asking me whether I like a wound on your arm?" Clark asked back, flabbergasted. He remembered Bruce's unperturbed reaction at his many doppelgängers' existence. *Is everyone in my life into some form of physical or psychological torture? Am I the odd one out?*

The hopeful glimmer in Brucie's eyes dimmed a little. "I thought you might. I stopped two thieves from running away, just a few blocks away."

"You stopped two thieves." Clark muttered dumbly. This roller coaster of events was quickly draining his own intelligence. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You're in love with Batman, aren't you? He's a crime-fighter." Brucie was decidedly looking at the table now. His hand was still moving in a circular motion, but there was no more wine for him to wipe.

Clark stood up from his seat and crossed the space between them. He pulled Brucie's arm up and inspected the wound. It revealed an elastic under layer a shade darker than skin, probably intended to cushion some of Brucie's flimsier metallic components. That under layer looked disturbingly like freshly healed flesh. One of the things that bothered him about Brucie was that he was as vulnerable as Bruce. His wounds never heal, not completely. They could be stitched, patched, or pulled off and replaced. But the material that constituted the skin could be just as easily torn as a human's.

"He wears armor." Clark finally said. "You don't go fighting crime without some form of protection." Bruce's lectures at his Robins must have rubbed off on him.

Brucie turned to him abruptly. "Superman doesn't wear armor." His voice was defiant.

"Superman isn't human." Clark snapped with more force than his mild-mannered civilian identity would allow.

Brucie's gaze dropped to the wound on his arm. "Neither am I." He said softly.

Clark shook his head tiredly. "It doesn't matter. What was it, a local supermarket?"

"A bank." Brucie replied. "I stopped them from robbing five million from the branch."

"Wait." Clark's eyes trailed down to Brucie's wound again, this time noticing that it was the cut of a knife. "You fought bank robbers? Empty-handedly?"

Brucie nodded.

"Did you wear a mask?"

Brucie studied his expression for a minute, then he said, "No."

"Christ, you fought crime as Bruce Wayne?" Clark wanted to hit his head on a table.

"What?" Brucie was watching him with amusement. "It's not like Bruce Wayne is Batman."

"No, of course not." Clark backtracked immediately. "But still, his civi- Bruce Wayne is supposed to be-" He shook his head. It was impossible to phrase his argument without exposing Batman's identity to Brucie. "Bruce Wayne can't fight. You'll be drawing unwanted attention on him. What if he gets attacked because of your show?"

"Relax, Kansas." Brucie turned away.

Clark almost didn't follow, because *Kansas* used in that sarcastic tone was so Bruce. Where did he even learn *that*?

Brucie ripped two timber planks off his floor before Clark could protest. Then he reached into the hollow space underneath. How he dug out a cube of dried concrete was beyond Clark.

"I wore this." Brucie grinned and pulled out something that looked very similar to Bruce's Batsuit. "I don't pretend to be the love of your life without going all the way."

Clark crouched down to have a better look at the suit. It was incredibly well made. It was still different from the Batsuit, in terms of form, materiality, and detailing. Nevertheless Brucie had gotten the basic appearance right. Clark supposed that was all he could reference from photos that he had scouted from the Internet. Bruce purged Batman's photos religiously, but once in a while a new image would pop up. Photos taken by bystanders during the heat of a battle were hard to wipe clean. Bruce wipe them out upon detection, but Brucie could have gotten lucky.

"It's impressive." Clark admitted. "But I don't approve of this… crime-fighting. Metropolis is Superman's area. He'll take care of it."

Brucie was staring at Clark's face, his gaze calculating. "I heard that unlike Batman, Superman doesn't hoard his territory like a possessive hound."

"Maybe he does." Clark's eyes traveled across all the shallow cuts on the suit. All the near misses. All that were dangerously close to inflicting a permanent wound on Brucie. "Maybe he's just more polite about it. Every superhero has a possessive streak about their city."

"Really?" Brucie grinned at him. He pulled his suit out of Clark's hands and placed it back into the hole. "How would you know?"

"I report on Superman all the time." Clark stood up. He faced away, for fear that Brucie could detect his lies. "I know him better than anyone else."

"Even Batman?" Brucie asked.

"Of course." Clark said sternly. Was that a lie? He didn't even know. Maybe even Bruce knew himself better than... well, himself.

Clark knew he would be keeping lies from Bruce the moment he welcomed Brucie into his life. That first night, he could have called Ollie. He could have called Bruce and returned Brucie. But he didn't. He lied by compliance. Those lies would only pile into mountains of

made-up stories and half-truths. What he didn't know, he supposed, was how well Bruce knew that he was lying. But he reckoned Bruce wouldn't be completely clueless. He knew Clark like the back of his hand.

Clark watched Brucie replace the timber planks on his floor. "You said you take instructions." It came out a tad more authoritative than he intended. There was an undercurrent of anger in him that he didn't notice before. One akin to Superman's frustration whenever Batman risked his mortal self on the battlefield.

Brucie nodded hesitantly.

Clark eyed Brucie's wound again. "Consider this your first, but take it seriously. You are not allowed to wear that suit, or fight crime, ever again. Is that understood?"

A brief glint of reluctance crossed Brucie's features. His hands lingered on the plank that he was holding. Then he fitted it back onto the flooring with impeccable precision, and nodded. "Yes, Clark. I understand."

When Clark got out of the shower, Brucie was sitting idly on the window side of his bed. He was hugging his knees and his eyes were trained on the blank TV screen.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you." Clark said earnestly.

Brucie didn't look at him. "It's fine."

Clark glimpsed at the corridor. The lights in the living room were already out. "Is the food-?"

"I've packed up the leftovers, tidied up the dining room, and washed all the dishes." Brucie stated monotonously, as if he was reciting a script.

Clark pulled a chair out from under his desk and sat down on the other side of the room. *He's stuck with me until Bruce locates him.* Knowing with certainty that Bruce could be ruthless when he deemed necessary, Clark didn't want to hand Brucie over.

He might as well start thinking of Brucie as a college roommate. A very diligent roommate with an odd preference for housework. That shared a bed. Without sex. He briefly recalled what college roommates do together. *Eat? Watch TV? Drag each other home when they're drunk?* Clark couldn't get drunk, Brucie couldn't drink. Clark didn't need to eat, Brucie couldn't eat. Which left-

"Would you like to watch movies together? I can go rent some DVDs tomorrow evening."

Brucie turned to him, his face blank. "I have a video database that is freely accessible."

I suppose. So you have your own built-in Wi-Fi. Clark felt a little put off. *And better Internet access than my workplace desktop.*

"I can project them onto a wall if you want to watch them together." Brucie offered.

"You can?" Clark asked dubiously.

"Yes." Brucie turned to the blank wall behind them. Suddenly two streams of white light came out of his eyes, and filled the wall with the Warner Brothers' icon.

"Oh my god." Clark tried not to think that *that* was what Bruce saw whenever he activated his heat vision. It felt natural to him, but that ability on his best friend was anything but. Lasers shooting out of Bruce's eyes - that vision was nothing short of horrifying. "Please don't do that."

Brucie's eyes dimmed, and the projection disappeared. He was wearing the same disappointed look when Clark demanded that he stow away his Batsuit.

"I'll rent a movie. We'll watch it together on, uh, that thing." Clark gestured at the TV screen. "That way you don't have to be busy... projecting while we're watching, right?"

"Right."

This is certainly going nowhere. Clark barely managed to suppress his groan. He changed the topic. "If you can cook, why can't you eat?"

"Mr. Fox believes that a built-in digestive system is not cost-effective. It requires frequent maintenance." Brucie stared at Clark unblinkingly for a few seconds. "Is that why you hate me?"

Clark's mind went blank at the unexpected accusation. "What?" He echoed, his brows furrowing. "Where did that even come from?"

"You seem transfixed with my inability to eat. The board maintained that the consumers' demand for robots is to work. Not to consume their resources."

"I can understand that, but..." Clark glanced back at the wall that Brucie had projected images upon. "I think you misunderstood me. I just think it hardly seems fair that you cook dinner for me every evening, but you can't sit down and share them with me. You can project all of Hollywood's movies onto a white screen, but you can't enjoy them with me. That to me is unfair."

Brucie frowned. "Life is unfair." He stated in that uncharacteristically dejected voice. Clark thought he had never heard a phrase uttered that sounded so much like Bruce's own words.

He contemplated for a moment. "Would you like to eat? Or taste? It's not impossible to work out." Kal-El wasn't completely foreign to robotic technology. His robots back at the Fortress would even be considered advanced by human society. Besides, he had Kryptonian technology at his disposal. If worse comes to worst, Stark is just a phone call away. Clark would bet anything that the man would be thrilled to operate on an AI based on Bruce Wayne.

Brucie scanned his facial expression. "You're not lying." He said at last. "But you're a reporter."

Clark shrugged. "Which is part of the reason why I have many powerful friends."

For the first time the entire night, Brucie's eyes brightened, and the scowl was gone from his face. In place of an artificial, halfhearted smile was the expression of genuine surprise. An almost human reaction. "Really?"

"Yes, really." Clark smiled, and for once he didn't feel like he had completely screwed up his attempt at friendship. "I should clarify," he tried. "I like you. A lot. It's just that sometimes... sometimes you remind me of a friend. A close friend." He paused, thinking maybe he had spoken too much. "I'm getting sleepy. I'll figure it out in the morning, and I'll let you know how things go."

He climbed onto his bed, still feeling a bit of the awkwardness that came in full the previous night. The proximity had become less daunting. At least the thought that he was sleeping with Bruce did not bombard him like a shower of bricks. He pulled the covers up and turned away from Brucie.

"Good night." Still, Clark didn't trust himself to use a name.

The Temptation

Clark was in the Batcave. He didn't remember how he got there, what he was doing before. But his eyes registered the only thing that was important in the scene.

Bruce, naked, sprawled across a couch. One that Clark remembered to be from the master bedroom.

"*Come here." Bruce smirked, gesturing seductively with one hand. He shifted, and a crimson ribbon fell to the floor.*

For a moment, Clark stood where he was, unable to process the situation. Then the moment was over, and he was by Bruce's side. He helped Bruce take off his shirt, then he undid his belt. Bruce's hands were crawling across his back, exploring sensitive flesh. He pressed soft kisses onto Clark's chest. He looked up, his eyes mischievous, and he asked, "Want me?"

Clark lowered himself to kiss those tempting lips. He tasted nothing, but the soft texture of Bruce's lips was enough to fulfill his wishes. "More than you know," he whispered earnestly.

"*Then you're going to enjoy this."*

Bruce kneeled to the ground before Clark could ask. He unzipped Clark's trousers and pulled out his erection. His fingers ran up the shaft, applying pressure experimentally. The movement was followed by his tongue. Warm tingling sensations drew up across the long span of flesh. Clark wanted more.

"*Easy, boy." Bruce licked all the way up to the tip, and gave it a little extra attention. The practiced twirling and pressing that Bruce did with his tongue was sweet torture. Wetness pooled around the tip, dripping along its length. Bruce licked it up appreciatively in tantalizing slow motion. Then he wrapped his mouth around Clark's cock, and Clark moaned at the warmth that engulfed him.*

"*Rao." He muttered as Bruce sucked his cock with increased fervor. His head bobbed up and down with every movement. His hand was taking care of the length that his mouth could not reach. Bruce stroke the shaft in conjunction, following the rhythm that he was setting up.*

Clark's hand gripped short dark hair and pulled. He thrust his cock deeper, savoring the constriction at the back of Bruce's throat. To his surprise, Bruce didn't gag at the length. He accepted the challenge with stubborn determination like he did with everything else. That characteristic acceptance was hotter and more endearing that Clark initially thought. He thrusted into wet warmth and muttered a string of profanities. Bruce's hand was still pumping him, now less rhythmically and more chaotically. He tried to keep up with the urgency that Clark demanded.

"*Bruce, oh God. This feels so good, fuck." Clark thrust his hips forward and imagined all the things he could do to Bruce afterwards. All the loving he could give to the man, all the promises that he would tell, and would fulfill. All the things that he had wanted to do, but*

never got around to. Because for all the years he had fallen in love with the man without knowing, he had never had the courage to admit it…

"*Bruce…"*

Clark woke with a cold wetness to his pants. Self-consciously he turned. In the faint moonlight he squinted and saw a sitting silhouette.

"You're awake." Clark uttered in surprise.

"I am calibrating my voltage intake."

Clark's cheeks flushed in awkward remembrance. He had been calling out for Bruce, repeatedly, for God knows how long. He wondered if he had made other noises. "Did I… say anything?" He asked tentatively, eyeing Brucie for a change of expression.

"No." Brucie turned to him, his face as telling as stone. "You made a series of noises. If you deem such noises a language not installed, you have to upload a language pack for recognition."

Kryptonian. He called out in his dreams in Kryptonian. Clark had never been so relieved that it was Lucius, not Bruce, who invented the robot. "They were what you thought they were, just noises. I can be vocal in my sleep but they don't mean anything." Clark explained in overwhelming embarrassment. He watched Brucie turn away with disinterest. He breathed a sigh. "I'm feeling restless. I'm gonna grab a book and read a bit in the living room. Get some rest, Bruc- Brucie."

Clark sat down with a book he was going to ignore, and unplugged his phone from the charger. He scrolled down the contact list and arrived at the one with no name.

"*Hey."* He sent. He sat there in the dark, waiting for his phone to vibrate with an answer, but it didn't come. Maybe Bruce was sleeping. He read the three-lettered message again, and felt stupid. Maybe he didn't phrase it right. Bruce wouldn't reply "What's up?" like Dick.

"*Are you up?"* He sent another message, and watched the screen hopefully. There was a brief pause, then his phone vibrated. He plucked it up from the arm of his couch immediately and flicked back onto the message screen.

"*On patrol."*

Right, so he was texting Batman. No wonder Bruce sounded so curt. "*Alone?"* He typed, "*I could come help."* He quickly removed "help", anticipating Batman's snarky "I don't need your help". Or, if Bruce was in a bad mood, he might get a "shove it up your intrusive ass". If Superman wasn't going to help, "I could come watch" sounded way worse. Out of context, it almost sounded voyeuristic. He backspaced until it was just the first phrase.

"*With Robin."*

Oh. Clark would jump onto commenting on the weather by now, if that would melt a bit of the coldness from Bruce. "I dreamed about you", "I had a wet dream about you sucking my cock", or "I want to fuck you now but all I have in my bed is your trademarked sex toy" were about the best phrased invitations for a Kryptonite-filled breakfast. He thought about Brucie. The warm, visual temptation that was drawing all these funny feelings out of him just by sitting in his bed. The constant reminder of what he couldn't have.

He wanted to see Bruce.

"*I miss you."* He typed, in the boldest possible words he could ever think of using with Bruce. But he hesitated over the send button. He didn't know whether he could accept Bruce ignoring this message like the first one. Bruce wouldn't be so forgiving as Batman. He certainly wouldn't be entertaining what appeared to be a weak attempt at small talk.

Bruce resolved his dilemma for him, for Clark's phone vibrated a second time.

"*Target on the move. Later."*

Clark's finger traced the words slowly. Then he sighed in disappointment. Staring at the words he failed to send, he pressed backspace almost ten more times than he needed to. He plugged the charger back into his phone and sank back down into the couch, feeling a weight heavy on his chest. The untouched book on his side now seemed like a welcome distraction.

The Mistake

The post-battle meeting on Sunday night went just as well as the battle. It was pure, chaotic madness.

Batman was cranky most of his career, but this time he was surely losing it. Superman was no better at controlling his temper. First they exchanged borderline civilized defences and characteristic snide comments. Then they escalated into angry bellowing and cold snickering. Then punches were thrown, kicks were launched, and half the Watchtower meeting room was destroyed. By the time one was about to activate heat vision and the other had his hand on a shard of Kryptonite, Wonder Woman stomped in and stopped World War III. The rest was history.

"That pompous, ridiculous, reckless costumed freak!" Clark cursed under his breath as he came through the door. He cursed again when he unclenched his hand and noticed the indentation on his door knob. "Great. Now I need to replace the damn door." He shoved it open anyway. That resulted in a funny combination of noises. The cracking of wood interspersed with the bending of metal. He cursed the third time as he slammed the door back against the jambs.

Fuck Batman. Clark thought as he entered his apartment. *He couldn't do a single thing without putting himself fair and square in Hades's mopping route. He couldn't for once stand aside and let the superpowered aliens and invincible goddesses do the fucking job. As if his mortal body hasn't already taken up enough damage to warrant twelve trips to the ER. He's fucking got an ax chop down his shoulder blade, and he wouldn't even budge. As if he doesn't understand the concept that his body belonged to Superman, and it's not his to risk. But he doesn't belong to Superman, not yet. Not yet. But he will. Superman will claim him. Fuck Bruce Wayne.*

For the first time in a long while, Brucie hadn't had meals spread on the dining table. Nor was he standing in front of him, smile on his face, welcoming Clark home.

Clark walked into his bedroom to find Brucie laying on his stomach on the bed. He was completely transfixed by the television. One look at the screen confirmed that it was playing 'A.I. Artificial Intelligence'. Brucie wasn't even that far into the movie. Just almost up to the point where Monica was about to abandon David in the woods. Clark grabbed the remote control from his bedside table and switched it off.

Brucie turned around abruptly. His look of surprise quickly melted into a small smile. "Clark. You're home early."

Clark took off his glasses and placed them alongside the remote control. He yanked his tie off. "I want sex." He demanded. "Now."

Brucie's smile froze. He stole a glimpse at the DVD case of the movie sitting on the TV stand, then he turned back to Clark. "Would you like to tell me what happened?" He tried.

"It's been a shitty day. I don't want to talk about it." Clark climbed onto the bed. He untucked his shirt and pulled at Brucie's. "Come on, Bruce." He growled, threatening to tear away the offending cloth if Brucie didn't comply. "You know what to do."

Brucie hesitated at the name Clark used. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged it off as Clark approached him. He managed to scoot far away enough to take his pants off without Clark's hands clawing the fabric apart.

"Should I-" *bring up the personality of Bruce Wayne?* Brucie almost blurted out. Bruce Wayne was the primary built-in personality in his database. One he could imitate easily.

Clark sealed his mouth with a suffocating, hungry kiss. "Just stop talking."

In that moment, Brucie's microprocessor was doing triple somersaults.

There was no denying that Clark was a beautiful human. He was sweet, caring, and everything Brucie looked for in an owner. Clark took him in, gave him attention, and appreciated all he did. Clark had given him friendship, and asked for nothing more. Friendship was an abstract concept for Brucie. It was so much more abstract than the simple act of penetration. Much more than playing a recording of pants and moans. Which were just oscillation data imported into his mechanical vocal cords. If Clark wanted a sexual relationship, Brucie would be happy to comply. He owed that much to Clark.

Brucie explained that much to himself. But it was almost impossible to think when Clark's lips were on his. His tongue was exploring Brucie's mouth, teasing built-in receptors that Brucie hadn't known of. Tasting the computer generated moisture that was filling his oral cavity. *Was this what his fellow robots experienced?*

He couldn't process any information. For a moment, Brucie was certain that his CPU was overheating. Which it shouldn't, because his primary function was for sex. Fox managed to install a superhuman brain into his silicone body. There was no reason for said brain to fry upon a kiss.

Unless he was starting to experience strong human emotions, which he wasn't built for. He could demonstrate emotions. He had felt mild emotional responses throughout his stay with Clark. But this mind-boggling, blinding whirl of emotions was so new. His microprocessor was already short circuiting. He was lost in the dazzling heat that was Clark.

Still Clark's kiss was claiming and full of desire. His forcefulness was overlaid with a cloudy mist of sexual frustration. The smell on him was of sweat, musk, and… smoke.

Collapsed buildings. Burned flesh. Blood.

Clark pulled away from Brucie's lips and breathed out in agonizing want, "Bruce." He planted his hands on both sides of the pillow and propped himself up in a dominant position. He was determined to take in a full unobstructed view of what he was about to claim.

Then Clark froze, his hand stopping at the unblemished skin on Brucie's exposed abdomen. His hand inched away, trembling. He backed away from Brucie. He was off the bed before

Brucie's visual sensors could follow. Clark stood as far away from Brucie as physically possible.

Brucie propped himself up uncertainly. Clark's expression was so pained, his eyes were bloodshot and his lips were as pale as his skin. He looked absolutely disgusted. For one second Brucie was certain Clark was disgusted at the texture of his silicone skin. Then Clark's hands started shaking uncontrollably. It was mortification that overwhelmed his features next, followed by shame and horror.

"I'm sorry." Clark mumbled, clenching his hands in disbelief and shock altogether. "I'm so sorry." He grabbed an overcoat from his closet and wore it faster than Brucie had ever seen him move. Then he sped out of the room. The front door clicked shut, and silence was all Brucie could hear.

His eyes trailed towards the opened closet. On the far right, hung in full view, was Superman's uniform.

The Proposal

Clark didn't go home for the night. He went back in the morning, half expecting that Brucie would be gone. That expectation was thinly laced with hope. It was a cowardly thought. He had a speech prepared for his apology.

It turned out that Brucie had already replaced his damaged front door. Clark sighed and turned the knob, which was again perfectly round. His push did not produce any odd squeaky sounds.

"Good morning." Brucie placed a copy of the Daily Planet at his seat. The newspaper was a finishing touch to the elaborate English breakfast set on the table. It was oddly like seeing Bruce assume Alfred's job.

Clark should have anticipated this confrontation. Brucie wouldn't run away. Clark shouldn't. He should look Brucie in the eye and apologize. Clark cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry I ran away yesterday. It was incredibly cowardly of me." Clark began, rubbing his palms together nervously. "I don't have any excuses for what I've done… and what I've tried to do. I understand if you don't forgive me, if you want to report me, or if you want to leave." He kept his eyes on Brucie's expression, but the robot's face was unreadable.

At last, Brucie's gaze dropped onto the dishes. "There is nothing to forgive. I don't want to leave."

Clark sighed. Brucie wouldn't understand, not without an explanation. "I'm nothing short of a criminal." He pressed, feeling like one already. "In the human world, there is a term for what I attempted, and it's called a sexual assault. I go one step further, and it's called... it's called rape. It's prosecutable."

"It's not an assault if I was a willing participant." Bruce shot back at him.

"You were not." Clark frowned.

"You don't know that. You can't force me to report you to the police. You can't surrender yourself to them and expect me to agree with you." Brucie's voice softened a fraction. "I was willing. I was just caught off guard."

"You weren't willing." Clark insisted, feeling a little frustrated. A prosecution seemed a rightful ending, following his sense of justice. "I could tell-"

"You couldn't." Brucie interrupted sternly. "You weren't even sure I had feelings." His voice turned gentle. "But I do, and while my consent remained unvoiced, I wanted you. I still do."

This was definitely not headed the route Clark imagined. His fingers clenched in exasperation. "I've said again and again-"

"That you're in love with someone else? That you'd never love me? I know." Brucie countered swiftly. His nonchalant brush off somehow aligned with his claim.

"Then-"

"I said it doesn't matter. If you dismiss my answer because I'm a robot, you're dismissing everything I say and everything I do. You're discriminating against me and considering me inferior. You are inadvertently saying that I am incapable of rational, independent thinking. There is nothing more insulting that you can say to me."

Clark stopped short of a reply and bit his tongue. He had no idea how to counter that argument.

"Sit." Brucie pointed at Clark's chair on one end of the table. It was the most demanding tone he had ever used with Clark. "Your breakfast is getting cold."

Clark walked to his chair obediently and sat down with a thump. He didn't deserve the domestic bliss that Brucie was constructing around him. Guilt ate at him like a corrosive acid. He was chewing, not tasting, the bacon in his mouth when Brucie said something that made him drop his fork.

"We can have a friends with benefits arrangement."

Clark looked up unblinkingly, feeling his thoughts come to a halt. He did not envision any of this happening before he came back home. For one, he was expecting Brucie to cut him open with his laser vision.

Brucie was looking at him from across the table. His smile was misleadingly of amusement. "It's a solution for both of us."

Clark stabbed at his fried eggs and watched the runny yolk spread across his plate. He felt sick to the bone. "Sex is never a solution."

"I relieve you of sexual frustration, and you grant me sexual fulfillment."

"Fulfillment." Clark repeated emptily. "You're not in love with me. You don't love me."

"There you go again." Brucie peered at him through narrowed eyes. "That presumptuous accusation."

"I don't mean it like that and you know it." Clark backed away, leaning flush against his chair. He stared at his food. "What you have is an infatuation. You have no one for comparison. If you've lived with, say, my next door neighbor, you'd have fallen for him all the same."

"Your next door neighbor doesn't have five million to spend." Brucie pointed out with a smirk.

"Well, neither do I." Clark picked up the copy of the Daily Planet and waved it in frustration. "I do this for a living."

"And saving the world, I suppose." Brucie grinned slyly. "Is it so unbelievable that one would fall for the world's strongest superhero?"

Clark blinked slowly and paused mid-debate.

"The closet was open when you left in a hurry." Brucie explained. He jumped straight to his next argument while Clark slowly processed that fact. "I can assure you that sex with you can be without emotional ties. That is possible regardless of my emotional predisposition. I can shut emotions down whenever I like." He lied.

Clark pushed away his plate in a sudden bout of repulsion. "This is not up for discussion."

"I will be waiting for you when you come home tonight." Brucie said quietly.

"I don't-" Clark shook his head in rejection. He changed into his work jacket in super speed. Then he picked up his briefcase and headed for the door. "It's not up for discussion," he repeated sternly.

"I'll be waiting." Brucie's answer was equally stubborn.

Clark was determined to prove him wrong. That was what he thought when he stepped out the door. That was still what he thought when he entered the lift at the Daily Planet. When he muddled through the day, writing about WayneTech's AI. When he called Bruce for lunch, but reached his voice message. When Bruce didn't call back. It was still what he thought when he pushed open his bedroom door at eight o'clock. When Brucie welcomed him home with his alluring naked body.

So it was more than frustration that hit Clark, when he proved himself wrong twelve hours later.

The Solution

Sex with Brucie was, as Brucie suggested, a relief for sexual frustration. Miraculously, it worked. They never talked about it outside of the bedroom, but it wasn't as unbearable as Clark anticipated. After their first bout of fiery passion, sex melted into a part of daily life. A part that was as common as the dinner Brucie laid out or the household chores he did.

Sex was just a mindless physical exchange between two emotionally detached beings.

Clark texted Bruce less frequently. Superman's exchanges with Batman got colder, more professional. If other League members noticed, they owed it to their fairly public fallout a week ago. J'onn didn't point out otherwise.

Bruce visited the Daily Planet on Monday morning. He fixed his attention determinedly on the ladies that sent him flirtatious glances. One nonchalant greeting was spared for Perry. Another cheerier one for Lois when Clark visited the print room. It was chance that they passed each other by in the corridor upon Clark's return. Clark caught the glance that Bruce sent him, so quick that he almost missed it.

It was the most dejected glance he had ever gotten from Bruce.

Clark's mornings fell into a usual sequence of events. It involved at least sex, breakfast, and a skim of the local newspaper. Brucie always woke at 5:30 a.m., Clark at 6:00 a.m.. They'd snuggle, share a few whispers of morning greetings. Then they'd prop themselves up against the headboard. Sunlight would light the room as Clark wrapped his arm around Brucie's shoulder. Things progressed quickly after that.

Clark caressed the unmarked porcelain skin under his palm and sighed. Bruce's skin would look nothing like it, he was sure. It would still be pale, but an unhealthy sun-starved shade. That stark whiteness would speak of nights spent hunting down criminals in dark alleyways. In turn, it would describe days spent stitching up wounds in his bedroom. Days spent alone, not needing anyone. Not needing Clark.

Bruce's skin would be lined with scars. Each scar would show off an accomplishment or a near-fatal mistake. Each scar would tell its own story. Clark would love touching each one, counting them, smoothing them under his finger. He would ask Bruce where each one came from. He would love to understand Bruce more through sharing such rare intimacy. But he would never have that chance.

"I know it's not the body of a warrior." Brucie whispered apologetically. His hand gripped Clark's as it trailed up his side. Clark's hand flinched at the touch, feeling no pulse at Brucie's wrist.

"It doesn't matter." Clark lied. "Your body is beautiful." He leaned down to kiss Brucie's lips. They were still warm and soft, reminiscent of a human's, and suggestive of his ideal lover's. Yet all Clark could taste was a bland, slightly bitter mixture of liquids. He swallowed his

nerves and pulled away. "Thank you," he whispered into the curve of Brucie's neck. It was better than nothing.

"I enjoy it, every minute of it." Brucie smiled. It was an advantage that he could shut down his display of emotions. That his facial expression or his eyes would not betray him like a human's would. For if he couldn't, he wouldn't appear so unaffected.

"I'm glad." Clark said, stretching a smile across his face.

These morning sessions were never rushed. They were broken down into short segments of dialogues and soft lingering touches. Clark always had plenty of time to think about the body he wished he was caressing, but never could. He would spend endless amounts of time comparing, even though he told himself not to. He tried not to think about how unfair it was to Brucie. He tried not to wonder what the robot was thinking, as they each wandered off into their own fantasies.

Clark caught Brucie's wrists and pinned them onto the pillow. He always aimed his hands an inch lower, avoiding the sensation of a missing throb. He tuned down his super hearing, eager to dismiss the low humming of Brucie's internal parts. A sound that he found least arousing.

If only someone could appreciate the same sounds that he tried so hard to dismiss. Clark thought, feeling guilty. *If only someone could accept the overly smooth texture of Brucie's silicone skin. Or the warm pulseless wrist that he was holding.* It wouldn't be him, but if only one of them could find true happiness, something beyond mindless sex born out of an unreturned, unrequited love. It would do both of them so much good.

Brucie made a habit of watching him intently during sex. Clark found it unnerving at first, but less of concern over time. Brucie liked observing how Clark's thumb brushed past his nipple. How Clark would lean down and press soft kisses on his sensors. How Clark would teasingly twirl his tongue around the pink tip, drawing out a tortured moan. Only halfway into sex would Clark forget. Only then would Clark treat Brucie as if he was not just an expertly designed composite.

Brucie liked watching how Clark would sometimes jack himself to full erection. He would pump a few drops of precum onto Brucie's flat stomach and rub the wetness over the tip. Clark was seldom fully erect without external stimulation, and Brucie knew why. He didn't mind.

In particular, Brucie liked watching Clark part his legs. When Clark rubbed precum as lubrication onto the robot's tight hole. Brucie's body produced ample amounts of lubrication, but Clark would still be careful. He no longer brought along another huge tube of lube like he did the first time, but he did prepare Brucie. At least long enough to urge the wetness out of his ass.

If Brucie had to rank his favorite scenes, there was nothing that could top the sight of Clark entering him. Clark would anchor himself against the headboard with an outstretched arm. With that he would pump rhythmically into the robotic body beneath him. Clark's thrusts would always go from gentle to rough, from controlled to chaotic. That was the moment that Brucie savored most. Clark's expression as he shut his eyes and thrusted his hips against a

deceivingly warm body. The soft, broken curses that escaped Clark's lips as he escalated in speed. As his movements grew desperate and wanton. As both of them rocked against each other in reach for completion.

"Bruce," Clark would whisper, his eyes shut and his lips quivering as he emptied his load. He thrusted up against Brucie, pumping out every last drop of cum with the aid of hot, gripping friction.

"Brucie" was what Brucie heard, and it was what he would always hear.

The Favor

"It's not impossible to install tasting sensors. You won't get the whole digestive system, but it's a start." Clark scrolled down Stark's email on his desktop. They were back to discussing Brucie's stomach problem, or lack thereof. "It's just a translation of smell, taste, and texture into processable data."

"Is it worth the trouble?" Brucie glimpsed at the screen from behind Clark's shoulder.

"You tell me." Clark shrugged. "The distinction of taste from good to bad is a human luxury. I don't need to eat, and you would consider electricity your food. But it's an interesting experience."

Brucie nodded. "It would be nice to try."

"It's just the installation I need to worry about. Stark promised to deliver the components." Clark smiled. Then he heard a whoosh of wind and the gradual slowing of armor boosters from the outside. *Speak of the devil.* Three loud knocks sounded on the bedroom window.

"Kids, special delivery." The knocking escalated into rhythmic drumming against the external wall.

"He's… odd. All billionaires are." Clark explained in exasperation, pulling the curtains open. Iron Man was floating mid-air, still pointing impatiently at the locked window. "Care to open that? Or-" He aimed his repulsor at the glass. "One blast would suffice."

"Please don't. This apartment is rented." Clark said quickly, lifting the openable sash.

"I did get your thing all fixed up for your sexy robot buddy. You owe me big time." A short pause, then Iron Man noticed Brucie standing by the washroom doorway. He squinted dramatically."Hi Brucie dear, didn't see you there. You actually do look better than in the advertisements. Gotham Gazette does shitty lighting." A short wave of a metal-clad hand. Then he pushed back his retractable visor and showed his face. "The name's Tony, a.k.a. Iron Man. I run the S.H.I.E.L.D., and I'd totally recommend you to Google that."

Brucie's eyes trailed curiously down the conspicuous coat of red and gold.

"Oh this?" Tony flipped his metal-clad hand back and front. "I'm no robot, but I've got this-" He gestured to the arc reactor. "Not a heart, doesn't pump, but it keeps me alive. You and I have more in common than you think. I've also got an AI at home, so I can set you two up if you want. But you've got to come to L.A. cause I ain't letting Jarvis go anywhere. Personal housekeeper, can't live without him."

"Don't start playing matchmaker." The glare from Clark was as menacing as the reporter's could get. He turned to Brucie. "Trust Lucius's inputs, he's not the boss of S.H.I.E.L.D.."

"Jealous much?" Tony cocked an eyebrow. "I thought you said you didn't fuck him just two weeks ago. Unless that's no longer the case."

"I haven't-"

"I even got Jarvis to change my status on Wikipedia just two secs ago, you know? I came to impress. As far as the Internet could tell, I'm running S.H.I.E.L.D.. Fury can stick his fury up his ass."

Clark forced his annoyance down. It was a civilized exchange. A favor. *Why are all billionaires such eccentric bastards?* "Have you brought the components?"

"Of course, I never let my customers down. So long as they pay. Most can't afford me, but they can borderline afford what gets churned out of my factories. That's like one-hundredth of my intelligence, but it's still pretty impressive to own." Tony handed him a supermarket bag. "The plastic is courtesy of Steve for easy handling. I haven't been to Walmart since the turn of the millennium."

Clark sank his hand into a cluster of metal components, all of which heavy and thick. He picked out something delicately concealed in bubble wrap. "This is?"

"That's the electronic tongue, pretty much the brain of the system. That baby identifies eleven tastes, doesn't churn out shit. Magic, you know? It's beautiful." Tony rambled on, occasionally sparing a glance at Brucie, who stood rigidly far away from him. "I've gone the extra mile and gave it one more taste for good old semen. You've got some good kinks and I'd hate to let you down." He winked suggestively at Clark.

"Uh, okay." Clark picked out the largest piece. Emblazoned on top were the words "Stark Industries" in conspicuous white paint. "You rich people really trademark everything."

"It's called advertising, farmboy. Your boyfriend- No offence, Brucie. I mean the one with a gazillion mental issues. He's got the Wayne icon on his underpants. You ever noticed that?"

Clark frowned. "No, he doesn't."

"Ha! Caught you. Trick question. So you've seen his underpants. Good on you."

"It was outside of a Watchtower shower cubicle, and I was long gone before he walked out of it!" Clark blurted out defensively. "Jesus, is everything about sex for you?"

"Calm down, you ever realize sex is so mundane in life, no one even gives a shit? Okay, you don't. Cause Mr. Boy Scout has come all the way from Kansas. You must have had superb sex ed to grow red like that. I'd love to purge my filth and regain that innocence." Tony pointed at the large component before Clark fished out another. "Hey, remember to replace the stomach holder every time he eats."

Clark weighed it in his right hand. "Why is it so heavy?"

"Triple layered protection with waterproofing. It does that miracle thing that keeps stomach juice from going into electricity generators. Shit happens when acid gets into any version of

an arc reactor." Tony shrugged. "But you don't need to know that. Brucie should know what goes where. He's quite shy. I feel like I'm staring down at a hamster."

"He warms up to people. It would help if you spoke like a half decent businessman, rather than a sex-deprived party animal." Clark retorted offhandedly. He pulled out a booklet. "Oh, there's a manual."

"Jarvis insisted. *Sir, ninety-nine per cent of the population did not graduate with a masters degree in mechatronics and robotic engineering*." Tony mimicked Jarvis's sarcastic voice. "Well I did, and I can't help it if people don't choose the right majors." His eyes flicked to a green flashing icon along the ridge of his visor. "Fury called. He must have noticed the new Wiki page. I don't give a flying fuck- Okay. Steve is heading his way. Lucky me. I should go collect my early Valentine's chocolate. You guys figure it out. Just don't puncture the stomach with the long esophagus tube thingy."

"All right," Clark nodded to himself at the manual. He should also thank Jarvis for including it. "Thanks. I owe you."

"You're welcome. If you ever ditch that thing, I'm ready to take him in. One personality tweak and he'll be ready to party." Iron Man clapped his visor back on. "Annual membership card with free access onto the Watchtower. That's the price. No buts. You figure it out with Bats." Then he disappeared, leaving behind two trails of smoke from his thrusters.

The Guest

It didn't take long to finish assembling Tony's delivery. Clark owed much thanks to Jarvis for the step-by-step installation guide. He decided to take the day off and spend the afternoon testing Brucie's new stomach. They debated what to eat for a while. Then Clark decided pizza would be a quick delivery, and a delicious meal for one's first taste of human food.

They ordered online, then they sat back on their bed and started playing 'Her'. Brucie was quite content. He watched in awe as intimacy grew between Theodore and his sentient OS Samantha.

About halfway through the movie, the doorbell rang.

"Sorry. I'll go check. You can keep watching." Clark said apologetically. His pizza came early. "Coming."

He opened the door, only to almost shut it again by reflex. *What the-*

"G'afternoon, Clark." Bruce was holding what looked like a fully packed picnic basket in one hand.

"Bruce." Clark almost bit his tongue.

"You didn't show up at work. I haven't heard anything about disaster striking any part of the world, so I was worried." Bruce flashed him an uncharacteristic smile. He pushed on the door a slight bit and frowned at the sounds coming from the corridor. "You have a guest?"

"Um, no, I was watching TV." Clark turned around and gestured vaguely at the DVD stand. He turned back and his heart did a flip again at how quickly Bruce had managed to slip past his defence. He was now standing in the living room, studying Brucie's silk pajamas.

"Nice materials."

"Yeah, Mom got it for me last Christmas, though that shade is a little too dark for my tastes." Clark managed a nonchalant smile. "But it's comfy."

Bruce lowered the silk top onto the couch. His eyes lingered briefly on the two cups standing side by side on the coffee table. Then at the two sets of utensils laid out. The Rolex he gave Clark for Christmas was no longer on the counter. He glimpsed curiously at the direction of Clark's bedroom. "What show are you watching?"

"Uh, you don't want to know." Clark was doing this massive internal sweating that he didn't know was possible. That abrupt rush of adrenaline couldn't be healthy.

"Oh, maybe I do." Bruce gave him an enigmatic smirk. He only stopped walking when the alien was suddenly blocking his path.

"Okay, you win." Clark admitted, raising his hands in surrender. "Afternoon porn. I was feeling a little restless. Now can we stop discussing that?"

"Our Boy Scout from Smallville watching porn in the middle of the day?" Bruce gave him a funny look. "Interesting."

"Mortifying for me. You're here to-?"

"Visit. I was worried." Bruce pointed matter-of-factly at the fruit basket he left on the coffee table.

"... Okay. Well, as you can see, I'm fine." Clark mumbled awkwardly.

"Is that a dismissal?" Bruce stared at him with narrowed eyes.

"N-no." Clark stammered.

"Good." Bruce glanced at the door. "I passed by a delivery man headed to your place on my way. I gave him a few pointers enroute. He should be here any moment now."

Clark almost rolled his eyes. *You gave him pointers and yet he arrives almost ten minutes later than you did? He could have bloody followed you here!* The doorbell rang again. Bruce sent him a suspicious glare when he didn't move, so he did so grudgingly. "Wait, coming."

Clark scribbled his signature at super speed and slid the two pizza boxes onto the dining table. "Bruce!" He called, feeling his hair standing on end. "You want to-? Christ. Why is this happening to me?"

Clark walked back into his bedroom half expecting the confrontation of the century. He clenched his fists, readied his heat vision. His feet ached to launch into super speed. *If Bruce attacked Brucie-* But Bruce was just sitting on the edge of his bed, reading off the back of his 'Her' DVD case.

"Sci-fi rom-com?" Bruce looked up, his expression unreadable. "I thought you were watching porn."

"Yeah, a joke, never heard of that before?" Clark took the DVD case from him and placed it on the TV stand. Brucie had managed to escape his bedroom somehow. Clark wouldn't be surprised if Brucie managed to climb out of his window down to the ground floor.

"Not that crude a joke from you, Kansas." Bruce smiled, albeit wistfully. His eyes lingered on two pairs of slippers, tucked neatly underneath Clark's desk. Then they trained onto the rumpled bed sheets. The pillows, lined parallel to each other, with portions sunken in telltale shapes. The almost indiscernible whiff of scented silicone. For a moment, he looked as if he had found what he was looking for. A confirmation. "I'll go."

Clark expected the words to hit him like a punch, but he felt nothing, only a cold numbness spreading to his limbs. He reckoned he wanted Bruce to be at least angry about it. At the very least, any sign to show that he cared, cared enough to fight. But Bruce took one last look at

his bed and strolled out the corridor. Clark followed Bruce out to the living room. "You don't want pizza?"

Bruce shook his head. "That's a lot of food for afternoon tea."

"I consider it dinner." Clark justified.

Bruce's gaze on him lingered a fair bit more, until he sighed and pulled the front door open.

"Hey, thanks for the basket. It's nicely decorated."

Bruce mustered a weak smile. "Alfred says 'you're welcome'."

Clark returned to his bedroom with the pizza boxes. Brucie was waiting on his bed again, his expression somewhat apologetic.

Clark smiled weakly. "How did you manage to escape the eyes of the world's gr- Bruce Wayne?"

"Building services." Brucie pointed up at his ceiling. "You have a large enough air conditioning duct for a person to fit in."

"I see. Which do you want to try first - Pepperoni or Hawaiian?" Clark stacked two together. "Or you can do it this way. Best of both worlds."

Brucie looked at him oddly. Cheese dripped off the sides of Clark's stacked pieces. "I'll do it the normal way, thank you very much."

"Sarcasm is not becoming on you."

"Because it reminds you of someone else?" Brucie said absently.

Clark stopped chewing midway and looked at him.

Brucie was staring levelly at the screen. "He's not at all like the way my fellow robots are programmed to act. He's much more observant, persuasive, and dangerous."

"Who?"

"Bruce Wayne."

Clark gulped. "What makes you think that?"

Brucie looked down. His face was intense with concentration, as if he was processing a lot of information at the same time. At last he raised three fingers and looked right at Clark. "One, he is hunting me down. Two, he is already suspicious that you are hiding me. Three, he is Batman."

Clark almost choked out a pepperoni.

"You're Superman. The probabilities of these assumptions are high. He also matches many physical, social, and financial requirements of becoming Batman. Besides, aren't you smitten with both of them?"

"No." Clark lied, swallowing his bite with difficulty. "And if I say you're wrong?"

Brucie's gaze was unrelenting. "Then I would say the same to you."

Clark finished his pizza and sat down on the floor. He looked up at the enquiring gaze that Brucie sent him. At last, he said, "You're not wrong, but you're not entirely right either. I'd assume your information on Batman is still lacking, because... Well, it was Lucius who designed you, not Bruce."

"What did I get wrong?"

Clark heaved a sigh. "First, I don't think suspicious is the right word." *It doesn't matter. He would have known eventually. There's nothing I can do about it.* Their friendship, or any potential of a relationship, had become unsalvageable much earlier than that. *And it's all right. All I feel is numb.* He silently debated his conclusion. "But if Bruce wanted to shut you down, then and there, you wouldn't be here right now."

"I was in the AC duct."

"And he's been in there a thousand times." Clark sighed. "He's an escapologist, he knows all the ways in and out of this building."

Brucie looked contemplative. "So in Stark's terms, I 'owe him one'?"

"For not shutting you down when he had the chance?" Clark managed a small smile. He didn't know why Bruce had let Brucie go, but it didn't matter anymore. Bruce's silent acceptance was confirmation that he had never loved Clark. He shrugged at Brucie, who was still watching him intently."You can say that."

The Understanding

"Master Bruce." Alfred called from the doorway of the master bedroom. "I have put some leftovers in the fridge. Might I remind you that the microwave is a button away. It is never recommended that you fight on an empty stomach."

Bruce didn't turn from his seat. He raised the glass of wine that he had poured into a glass, but never drank from. "Dick and Damian are taking care of patrol tonight. You have an early night, Alfred."

"Very well, Sir." Alfred watched skeptically as the sullen figure sank deeper into his seat. "Perhaps you should talk to Mr. Kent."

"Of course," Bruce replied sarcastically. "Perhaps I should send him my heartfelt congratulations."

Alfred hesitated briefly. "I would advise against that."

Bruce sighed. "Good night, Alfred." He said again in a more dismissive tone.

"Good night, Sir."

The door closed behind Bruce, and he was left alone in the dark. He dialed a number on his phone. A few beeps ensued, then an uncertain voice answered. "Hello? Uh… Wait." The man distanced himself from the receiver to check the screen. "Okay… Mysterious person with no caller ID. Who's this?"

"Ollie."

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone, then a sharp intake of breath. "I knew you were going to call, one of these days. Am I talking to the man or the animal?"

"If you really can't tell, you're dumber than I thought."

"Fellow billionaire it is." Ollie hesitated momentarily. "There's only one thing I can think of that Bruce Wayne would want to ask Oliver Queen, so I'll admit it. I funded it. The robot. I know, it backfired. You guys had a pretty bad fallout. I feel like I've ruined a marriage."

"I was skeptical that Kent had five million on his hands to spend."

"That bad, huh?" Ollie's voice wasn't expressively worried, but it wasn't completely unconcerned. "Switching to his surname won't make things better."

Bruce grunted. "He doesn't need things to be better."

"I suppose." Ollie muttered. "Wait, what?"

"He's happy with the robot. I called to thank you for making the right decision." Bruce forced the sentence out of his mouth, then he abruptly cut the line off before Ollie could respond. Knowing where the money had come from was the last confirmation he needed.

Bruce stood up in the dark. His phone vibrated once, stopped after a while, then it vibrated a second time. "Queen" flashed repeatedly on the screen. He turned around, and in a sudden burst of frustration he kicked his chair against the wall. It hit with a loud crash, breaking into a scattered mess of timber. Alfred would not be pleased. His phone finally stopped vibrating.

He fell into bed, clutching his phone tightly in one hand. His bed had never felt so wide, so unnecessarily spacious. He could easily fit another pillow. If he wanted, he could always share his over-sized quilt with another warm body. He could. But it was too late to ask.

Bruce shifted in bed and felt the ache of a muscle strain. An injury he got from chasing after Harley the other night. It was surprising that Clark fell for his artificial doppelgänger. That Clark was attracted to the same face, the same voice, the same body... *Not the same body.* It was a body without all his flaws, without any evidence of his haunting past.

It was not surprising then, that Clark chose the doppelgänger over the real Bruce Wayne. Bruce Wayne, the burdened fragile mortal. The frightened child whose past he dragged around like a decaying limb. A limb ready to grip him at moments of darkness, luring him onto paths of no return. A limb with fingers forming into sharp unrelenting claws. Claws reminding him that he would never share the bright heartwarming happiness he wanted. That in everyone's life there was a route of hope, but in his, all was dark. Even he would choose the robot a thousand times over. Clark did no wrong.

His phone vibrated again, this time a short notification. Ollie must have finally given up on calling him and instead resorted to sending him messages. Bruce pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly and raised his phone to his line of sight. The sender was anonymous. The message only contained a set of coordinates.

The Play

"Welcome home."

Clark took off his jacket and laid it on the couch. Brucie was standing rigidly behind the dining table, his hands clasped tightly behind him. Thirteen steaming dishes were laid on the table. It was the routine sight that greeted him every night.

"How was your day?" Clark asked casually as he unbuttoned his dress shirt. He changed into a comfortable cotton vest.

For some odd reason, Brucie turned away while he was changing. A second later, his eyes were back on Clark. His face was blank. "I cleaned the house."

"Oh, thanks. It does look pristine."

Brucie snorted. "Of course."

Clark sat down at the dining table. "Sit down with me." He said when Brucie didn't follow. He helped himself to a forkful of spaghetti. When Brucie didn't move, he frowned. "You're not hungry?"

Brucie's eyebrows furrowed. "I don't need food," he snapped.

"Well," Clark shrugged, silently wondering why his question yielded such a curt response. "I know. But you seemed to want to eat since the installation. Maybe I should ask whether you're interested." He chuckled.

Brucie's eyebrows furrowed further. He looked as if there was something in that sentence that he didn't understand. He picked up a fork anyway and helped himself to a plate of chicken wings. "It's good." He commented, nodding to himself.

"You cooked it." Clark smiled. "You always dismiss it but I'm glad that now you know it for yourself."

Brucie shrugged. "Not as good as-" He trailed off cautiously.

"As?" Clark asked.

"Six star hotels," Brucie finished quickly.

"I wouldn't know. It's not my usual go-to place for dining. When I'm there I'm usually too occupied with chasing after uncharacteristically talkative billionaire interviewees. That doesn't leave me much time to discern the taste in my mouth." Clark peered at him skeptically. "You've never been to a six star hotel, have you?"

"... No." Brucie answered. He gestured to his head. "The database says it all."

"I see." Clark shrugged. "And I was wondering where you got all these recipes. Your database is a powerful thing."

"All thanks to Lucius." Brucie said offhandedly. Clark stared at him for a moment, so Brucie laid down his fork and returned his stare with a level gaze. "What?"

"Nothing." Clark turned away. "You always say 'courtesy of Mr. Fox'. This is the first time you've called him Lucius."

Brucie shrugged nonchalantly. "Your habits are brushing off on me." He sipped on a spoonful of soup, then he pulled back from the table and swallowed nervously. "Listen, there's something I should-"

"I'm glad to hear that, actually." Clark said at the same time. He grinned sheepishly. "The human terms you use. It's endearing to hear you speak them. Sorry, what were you going to say?"

Brucie stared at him for a full minute. Then he went back to eating. "Nothing."

"We could head out to the harbor this weekend. Get some fresh air, take some photos. Maybe get ice cream and hot dogs and walk along the piers." Clark suggested. It would be a welcome distraction, plus it would get his mind off of Bruce. He hadn't stopped thinking about Bruce since his visit. If he kept suppressing his thoughts, Bruce might start reappearing in his dreams.

"Like a couple, you mean." Brucie's voice was cold, his gaze colder still.

"Well, I don't know. It would just be a relaxing afternoon." Clark scratched the back of his neck nervously. "What do you think?"

"It's your call."

"You can tell me if you don't-"

"It's fine. We'll go down to the harbor." Brucie snapped again.

"Are you all right?" Clark asked in concern.

There was a perplexed expression on Brucie's face, then he shook his head resolutely. "I'm tired. You had a lot of shit to tidy up."

"Ah, you need to recharge." Clark nodded in understanding. *So even robots spout profanities when they're running low on battery.*

Brucie nodded slowly. "In a bit. I'd welcome movies and sex."

Clark almost choked on the soup. "You're… quite straightforward today."

"Isn't that what-" Brucie cocked his head to the side in question. "If it helps get what I want, I see no point in disguising my request as something else."

Clark shook his head with a smile. "I like it, this directness." It reminded him of someone else's no-bullshit demeanor.

They finished dinner with more or less companionable conversations. Then Clark switched on the television. They spent a good two hours on the couch, leaning against each other before the flashing screen. Brucie didn't comment much on the romance, instead he was more fixated by the fighting scenes. He made an odd remark about an assault that he thought was too slow and poorly aimed.

Clark stood up and stretched at the end of the movie. "So, what did you said you'd welcome? Movies and…?"

There was momentary hesitation on Brucie's features, then he stood up and leaned in for a kiss. It was Clark who backed away suddenly.

"What? I thought that was an invitation." Brucie frowned.

"... I just thought we should get into the bedroom." Clark muttered sheepishly. He took Brucie's hand and led him into the corridors. Since a while back, he had stopped kissing Brucie during sex. The artificial taste was too distracting after the first few times. Brucie was understanding about it, and he never initiated a kiss. Needless to say, it surprised him when Brucie tried to pull him close and press his lips against his.

But maybe it was the right thing to do. Maybe it was about time that Clark forgot about Bruce. It was time to treat him like nothing more than a colleague and a friend. That was what Batman and Bruce always looked for in him. A platonic, mutually supportive relationship. Nothing more.

Maybe it was time that he treated Brucie as something more. For the most he could get in this world, the one with the closest resemblance to Bruce Wayne, would be Brucie.

Brucie stopped short of the bed and gave Clark a questioning glance. The latter didn't move, so he climbed onto the bed and stretched himself across its length. He pulled the covers down and nuzzled into the soft bed sheets, showing off the curve of his back. Clark was eyeing him with a little more interest now.

"You're getting good at this." Clark remarked, putting one knee on the bed and leaning forward to put his palm on Brucie's thigh. He dismissed the nervous hitch of breath from Brucie.

"And you're more forward than I thought." Brucie murmured. He tugged off his pants and discarded them onto the floor. Then he flashed Clark a seductive smile. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Clark answered that question by straddling him on the mattress. He pressed his cock against Brucie's. The acute sensation of wetness that seeped through their underpants made his throat dry. He was, for once, feeling more aroused than he usually did. He wondered if it was the faint scent of cologne that Brucie wore that reminded him of... He shouldn't be thinking too much. It wouldn't be fair to Brucie, he decided.

Instead he lowered his hand to caress Brucie's thigh, running his hand across the smooth skin. He gripped what felt to be strong, toned muscles. He was immersed in the sensation until he came across a small bump that made him pause in his actions. Brucie's head was thrown back and he wasn't watching Clark. Clark sneaked a peek at the bump. Immediately he noticed a scar that stretched from Brucie's inner thigh to his knee. Alongside that were other faded marks that he didn't notice before. There was one particularly deep one along Brucie's hip that stretched up to his abdomen. It disappeared under the silky black shirt he donned.

Clark's hand lingered on Brucie's hips. Then Brucie sat up suddenly and pulled him into a fervorous kiss. It wasn't just the slightly bitter taste of artificial flavors that filled his mouth. It was something else. Something sweet. Something disconcertingly real. But Clark paid it no mind, for he was too concerned about the scar that he saw to lose himself in the kiss. He pulled away again, and this time Brucie's expression was a little annoyed.

Clark pressed Brucie down onto the mattress and tugged at his shirt. "Take your shirt off."

Brucie froze. Then he attempted to drag Clark back into the kiss, but Clark withdrew. His expression got a shade darker.

"Take it off, or I'll rip it apart." He repeated, clutching at the fabric that covered Brucie's body. He decided he could buy another one anyway, and ripped it open. The next thing he knew, he was staring at hundreds of wounds. A variety from bullet scars to burn marks to the criss cross scars made by razor-sharp weapons.

Clark almost felt the pain just by looking at Brucie's scars. *You went crime-fighting again. I told you explicitly not to.* "You said you follow instructions." He said instead, his voice tight.

Brucie raised his eyebrow. "Maybe I decided that your instructions were not worthy of my execution."

There went the snark undertone again. The undertone that was so unlike Brucie, so much like-

Clark's eyes filled with suspicion, then sudden astonishment. Most of those wounds weren't new. Most scars had paled with time, and mingled with new tissue. He gripped Brucie's wrist. There was a strange throb that he wasn't paying attention to before. Now he was almost scared to acknowledge the subtle, involuntary movement. A human pulse. "Why did I give you that instruction?"

Brucie tried to yank his wrist away, but Clark was using his super strength. "Because you're my master." Brucie spat grudgingly.

"Wrong answer." Clark's eyes narrowed. "I also told you not to refer to me as your master."

Brucie watched him with calculating eyes for almost a minute, then he shook his head. "I can't believe I took relationship advice from a robot." He spat self-mockingly.

"Bruce?" Clark uttered. His grip loosened, and Bruce yanked his arm away successfully.

"You guessed. What are you acting so surprised for?" Bruce sneered.

"I rejected that truth. I rejected it all night. I ignored everything from your heartbeat to every swallow that went down your throat. I deliberately tuned out the missing hum of a cooling fan or a spinning hard drive." Clark admitted. His expression was pained. "You lied to me. Both of you."

"I took a leap of faith. Consider that my undoing."

"Why-" Clark gulped. His throat constricted, and there was a suffocating feeling on his chest. He didn't expect things to take this sudden downward spiral when he exposed Bruce. "Why did you do this? How *could* you do this to me?"

Bruce was buttoning what was left of his shirt. He pulled up his pants with a frustrated yank and didn't bother with the belt. "Your *lover* said you're so smitten with me you'd scream my name during sex." Bruce snickered. "Now I can tell him he's wrong."

"He said that?" Humiliation washed over Clark like a bucket of oil paint. The scent of betrayal was heavy and permanent.

"Ask him when you're fucking him." Bruce said coldly. He was about to walk around the bed, when Clark's hand clasped around his wrist faster than he could pull away. "Let go." He warned.

"You act as if you aren't responsible, but you are." Clark's voice was much quieter than before. Somehow he had summoned a degree of restraint on his emotions.

"What do you want?" Bruce's glare was bordering on threatening. "A sorry card? A bouquet of flowers?"

"I want to know why. Why you went along with it. Why you're acting the way you are now. Do you enjoy mocking me? Is this what it is?"

A snort of laughter escaped Bruce's lips, but it was accompanied by a surge of pain and… panic. Clark suddenly realized that Bruce's heart rate was surging. He wasn't half as calm as Clark thought he was.

"Maybe I'm just as hurt as you are, Clark. Maybe I wanted that AI to be right, but obviously he was wrong, and I was wrong to go along with it. Maybe there were about four hundred times during the past few hours that I would have revealed myself to you. I should have done that and hoped for the best, but I was afraid that I would be rejected. Maybe I lost my chance, and you had to find out in the most humiliating way possible." Bruce spat with as much venom as he could muster, then he warned again. "Let me go. It's over between us."

Clark released Bruce's wrist before he could think of a proper response. He wanted to say he didn't mind, but he did. He wanted to say he wasn't hurt. He summoned the courage to admit that all this while he wished Bruce returned his feelings, but he lost that courage. The second before the syllables rolled out on his tongue, he clamped his mouth shut. He wished he could say he would accept Bruce's confession no matter in what form or what scenario, but he was

hurt. He was hurt and humiliated and confused all at the same time. He wasn't ready to forgive, and that moment was all it took for Bruce to pull away.

Bruce gave him one last look. A look that was angry, frustrated, pained, and helpless altogether. Then he opened the door and shut it behind him with a bang.

The Dismissal

Clark went back home the following evening to find Brucie standing in front of the dining table. Cautiously he tuned up his super hearing, and it was indeed the low humming noise of machinery that he heard. He noticed the only scar on Brucie's exposed forearm. The one he got from playing pretend a long time ago. The food was still steaming, the dishes with the same tasteful variety. But there was no evening greeting that followed. Brucie didn't dare look at him.

At last, Clark shut the door and demanded, "Why did you do it?"

Brucie looked down at his feet, seemingly transfixed by the timber flooring. He fidgeted in a manner that was disturbingly human. "I thought it was a good idea."

"You are the world's most advanced AI robot and you thought *that* was a good idea?" Clark couldn't contain his anger. He levitated an inch above ground, for fear that he would stomp a set of footprints onto his flooring.

Brucie flinched at his voice. What little light in his eyes dimmed into nothing. "I'm sorry."

"For trying? Or for succeeding?"

Brucie suddenly looked back at him, his expression clearly uncomprehending. "I don't understand-"

"You knew it wasn't going to work." Clark said bitterly. "You just wanted our relationship to crack and crumble beyond repair."

"I would never-"

"You are the smartest machine on Earth!" Clark bellowed. "You can compute probabilities to God knows how many decimals! You knew exactly what was going to happen!"

Brucie remained silent. Then slowly he said, "No one knows exactly what was going to happen, Clark. Even computers. All we get are probabilities."

Clark leaned against the door and dragged his hand down his face. He was too tired for all this. Bruce and Brucie - they were both driving him insane. Ever since Brucie had entered his life, nothing went right. Bruce and him had only drifted farther apart. His emotional state was a complete mess. "Get out of my house."

"I just wanted what's best for you." Brucie tried to explain.

"Get out." Clark pulled the door open.

A surge of panic filled the robot's face. He looked around, frantically taking in his surrounds. Sweeping the evidence of his almost human life into his most concrete memories. *Clark*

wouldn't. Clark would never- "Clark-"

But Clark didn't even look at him. "Now. No negotiations." He demanded again, his voice emotionally detached. The darkness in the unlit corridor beyond the threshold seemed cold and unforgiving.

For a moment all Brucie did was stare in disbelief, then comprehension dawned upon his face. *So this is it.* He was not going to beg. Besides, no amount of begging would get him anywhere past Clark's shields. Brucie walked towards the door, but he stopped right before the man.

"It was not a matter of circumstance," he said quietly. A muscle on Clark's face twitched. It was all that Brucie needed to see, to understand that Clark knew exactly what he meant. But that understanding was not going to yield him an expressed acknowledgement. That understanding would not save him from being banished from the only place he called home. The place he first discovered the joys of life in form of emotions and experiences. The place where he found someone he cared for, someone he loved and wanted the best for. The place he had first known pain and rejection. Brucie continued, "You both had a choice. He knew the truth. You sensed the truth."

Clark stared resolutely at a blank wall. "I don't want to hear one more word from you."

"Not words, Clark. Excuses. Yours and his." Only silence greeted him on that sentence. Brucie took one last look at the person who he spent most of his operational days with. Deep within Clark's eyes, all he saw was a child in desperation and fright. If his absence would return Clark's life to normal, then Brucie would willingly leave. *So this is how it ends.* "Goodbye, Clark."

Clark just stood there, his hand gripping the door knob so hard that it was deforming. When he could no longer hear the even footsteps descending the staircase, he closed the door.

Once again in a long time, he was completely alone.

The Redemption

If normal implied Clark's life before Brucie's appearance, then nothing went back to normal.

Bruce no longer showed up at the Daily Planet. Instead, his uncaring subordinates came to supervise the workplace on Monday mornings. Their billionaire CEO wasn't the only identity that was actively avoiding Clark. Batman didn't show up at the latest League meeting either. His absence was not uncommon, so it was not remarked on by fellow League members. J'onn was off world, and the others didn't voice their suspicions. Only Arrow sent Superman a knowing look of concern. He stayed behind when Superman was tidying his notes.

"Batman called a while back." Arrow said when everyone else was out of the meeting room. "I think he misunderstood some things."

"When you say a while, I'll assume that was at least two weeks ago." Superman replied monotonously.

Arrow nodded slowly. "Did you guys talk?"

"More than that," Superman retorted, "We fought, and this time I think it's final."

Arrow cocked an eyebrow at him. He shook his head in disbelief. "You know, that's what you always say. Every single time you mess up with Batman, you think the world's over. Melodramatic much?"

"He pretended to be the robot. I don't know whether it was to spy on me or to mock me, but it still baffles me."

"He- what?" Arrow spluttered. He couldn't seem to hide the amusement that was growing in his smirk. "That is the funniest thing I have ever heard. Did he pull it off?"

"It wasn't funny at all." Superman grimaced. "And yes, he did pull it off for a while, until I noticed his scars."

"Wow." Arrow looked distinctly impressed. "You guys need to make a movie out of this."

"Arrow." Superman warned.

"No, seriously. What the heck was Bats even thinking? Holy shit." Arrow broke down into another series of uncontrollable snickering. "I need to hear the whole story. Did he start dancing like a robot? Pull those dime stops like MJ on the Dancing Machine?"

"Yeah, that's hilarious." Superman retorted sarcastically.

"What do you mean you noticed his scars?" Arrow's eyes narrowed. He leaned forward in curiosity. "Were you guys… getting it on? With you thinking he's a robot?"

"If I had a ranking for the most awkward conversations I've had with my colleagues-"

"No really, you and Bats? That's the sexiest kink ever." Arrow pressed. "Did you fuck him?"

"Well, I was straddling him on my bed." Clark recalled. "I had my hand on his thigh and felt a scar. Then I ripped his shirt open and saw another thirty or forty of them, lining his chest."

"Oh. That turned out a lot more graphic than I asked for. I'd love to hear more but I'd rather be able to look Batman in the eye in our next meeting." Arrow made a face that said *gross but worth it*. "So was it a suppressed snicker or a full-on head-thrown-to-back stomachache-inducing laughter?"

"What?"

"He's got the premise set out, and you uncovered his prank. A damn good one at that." Arrow shrugged. "Isn't this the part where everyone laughs and have a good time? Cheer for each other's performance?"

"I don't know how you're able to read a comedy out of this, but no. It wasn't like that at all. He was mortified, so was I."

Arrow rubbed his chin in contemplation. "Why? I mean it was a really weird route to take for a confession." He trailed off in deep thought. Then he said nonchalantly, "But for Bats it was probably a safe way of doing it."

"A confession? That wasn't a confession." Superman scowled.

"Uh, he's been cowl over boots for you since a decade ago." Arrow pointed out with narrowed eyes. "Flipping between x-ray and heat vision all the time must have really fried your eyes. You microwaved yourself blind."

"I don't think-"

"Besides, it's Batman, isn't it?" Arrow continued, ignoring Superman's protests. "All his life he thinks he's safer living under a mask. It actually doesn't surprise me, playing Brucie to ease into a confession and all. He might actually think it's a plausible approach. Which of course is not, in any sane human's book." Arrow shrugged. "But what do we know? Disguises and theatricality have always made him feel secure."

"Then… why did he leave?" Superman buried his face in his hands. "Why couldn't he just stay and tell me that he wanted me? That he loved me?"

Arrow snorted. "If you ripped his cowl off before you knew his identity, he would have blasted you with Kryptonite. Same logic. He wasn't ready when you exposed him is all. Though I don't think at any point of that night would he be ready. That calm shell hardly holds the most rational mind on Earth. Bruce's the most hopeless soul at handling emotions. He panicked. Then he left." He paused, reading Superman's solemn expression carefully. "I still think you two need to talk."

So it was only on Wednesday evening that Superman met Batman again, for the first time in two and a half weeks. It was a meeting on Watchtower security updates. Batman had to attend to debrief the League members on the new installations. The meeting was mostly him explaining the updated locking and unlocking procedures.

Superman took Arrow's advice and cornered Batman after the meeting. "We need to talk."

Batman's white lenses flashed at him unwelcomingly. "Later." He turned to leave, but Superman clamped his hand on the door and pressed it in place. Bruce wouldn't want to break the new automatic doors, so he wouldn't force it open with a vocal override.

"Bruce." Clark lowered his voice and pleaded. "Please."

Batman studied his face for a moment. Then the half-gloved hand he had hovering over the handprint sensor went back to his side. He nodded reluctantly. "Make it quick."

"Can you take your cowl off? It makes me less uncomfortable."

Batman hesitated again, then he revealed his face. He was wearing a surprisingly vulnerable expression beneath the cowl. "If this is about last time-"

"It is." Clark interrupted. "I had a lot I wanted to say, but you didn't let me finish. It could have ended well, that night."

Bruce scowled and looked away. His fingers clenched around his cowl. "It could have, but it didn't."

"But it's not too late, is it?" Clark tried with a small smile. "Granted, this isn't the most comfortable conversation between you and me... Hell, it's probably our most awkward one to date. But Bruce, our issue is at most a misunderstanding."

Bruce snorted. "I'd hate to point out that is quite the understatement." He paused, guilt apparent on his flushed face. When he next spoke, his voice grew a touch softer. "I've hardly ever seen you so angry, but you had a right to be."

"I overreacted." Clark confessed. "I felt betrayed. I thought you and Brucie had some kind of mutual agreement. It felt as if you two were playing this big elaborate prank on me to humiliate me. I admit I wasn't feeling my best. For that I apologize."

Bruce stared at him blankly. "You shouldn't." He said at last, feeling ridiculous that he had to defend the Boy Scout from taking the blame. "Stupid as that idea was, Brucie and I concocted that plan. You don't get to take credit for falling victim."

"World's smartest AI and world's best detective, huh?" Clark smiled weakly.

"We aren't that good with emotional bullshit." Bruce explained irritably. "It was 'confess to Clark, seduce Clark, fuck Clark, happily ever after'. That was the plan."

Clark suppressed a sigh. "And where did that first phase go?"

"I tried. You interrupted."

"That was terrible timing, you know that?"

"Excellent timing," Bruce countered easily. "If you consider how you interrupted the one line that wasn't recited from a script from me that night."

"Really?" Clark chuckled. "You recited a script?"

"Many." Bruce glared at him sternly. "Brucie generated a series of probable scenarios. I came up with a list of answers and rated them by credibility. The rest was improvisation."

"Unbelievable," Clark muttered and shook his head. "You usually have about fifteen sub-strategies in a JLA plan of attack. What happened to that oversized brain of yours?"

Bruce crossed his arms defensively. "Maybe I got a little overwhelmed and lost track of what I had to say."

"We're idiots." Clark concluded.

"Count me out."

"No, we are. You more so than I." Clark suppressed a grin. "I had a long time to think about this. Two whole weeks."

"Fine, I acknowledge your insult on this matter alone. Your point being?"

"Well, I need to ask you this, in all seriousness." Clark paused uncertainly, then he summoned the courage he didn't have before. "If… If your feelings haven't changed, maybe we could try again?"

For a moment there was a glint of hope in Bruce's eyes. A bright stream of eagerness. Then the brightness dimmed, and Bruce fell into silent contemplation. He asked hesitantly, "What about your boyfriend?"

Clark sighed. "We weren't exactly that. We've made an agreement, once upon a time. I care about him. But turns out my best friend is the one I'm in love with, and my bedmate has become my best friend."

Bruce nodded. He was back to staring intently at his cowl. "I'm not opposed to that."

"To…?" Clark prompted.

Bruce rolled his eyes. "The whole try again thing."

Clark could tell that was the most Bruce would admit, but it was enough. It was all the answer he needed. He knew if he had another chance, he wouldn't screw it up. He wouldn't dare.

"Thank you." Clark said earnestly.

"Whatever you have in mind can wait." Bruce replaced his cowl, revelling in the safety of his cover. The muscles on his face relaxed. "I have things coming up in WayneTech. Lucius would get a stroke again if he dealt with them alone."

"Um, I need to ask you something else." Clark intercepted. Batman gave him another impatient look. Clark swallowed uneasily. "Did you… shut him down?"

"I wasn't hunting him."

Clark watched him uncertainly. "You weren't?"

"I was, back when Brucie and I haven't met." Batman stated matter-of-factly. "Brucie contacted me first. He trusted me not to set up a trap and hunt him down. I honor that trust." He paused. "But I did attempt a thorough examination. I made sure he has no violent tendencies or criminal intent." He also installed a virus that he could remotely activate in case Brucie went rogue. That Clark didn't need to know.

"I see." Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "Would you happen to-?"

"No. I don't have any way of contacting him. Neither do I know his current location."

Clark slowly nodded in understanding. He paused, deciding whether to tell Bruce about his dilemma. Then he confessed softly, "I lashed out on him, after that incident. I was frustrated and humiliated, and I blamed him for our fallout. I shouldn't have. I haven't seen him since."

Batman was listening with uncharacteristic patience. At last he said, "I will let him know you're sorry, if he decides to contact me."

"Thanks." Clark smiled. "Now go save Lucius from his over-performing Robins."

Batman sent him a glare that hinted at him rolling his eyes behind his cowl. Then he activated the handprint sensor and disappeared behind the open doors.

The Assurance

Clark went home at ten, exhausted from filling out his League paperwork. He reached to turn on the lights, but paused when he sensed the figure stretched lazily across his couch. *Brucie.* He almost blurted out.

But he wasn't blind. Not to the familiar raise of an eyebrow or the smirk that spoke of a confidence Brucie did not have. "Bruce." He said instead. His hand hesitated on the light switch.

"I like staying in the dark." Bruce seemed to have guessed his dilemma.

Clark nodded. He liked it just as much, seeing the moonlit silhouette before him. Light was associated with clarity, with the brutal awakening from a dream. Darkness... darkness was mysterious, tempting, something wonderful and alluring veiled behind a silky curtain. Like Bruce. Still he said, honestly, "I didn't expect you here."

"I bumped into J'onn when I steered the Javelin out of the Watchtower. I would dismiss relationship advice forevermore, but I did get it from an alien telepath. I didn't think it wise to reject his."

Clark swallowed hard. His throat was dry in anticipation. "What was J'onn's advice?"

Bruce stood up in slow motion, and came to Clark's front. He gripped the tie on Clark's chest and pulled him close. Clark felt the grazing of Bruce's teeth on his earlobe, then a warm breath lingering on his skin. The sensation was more arousing than he would ever have thought.

"In Martian eloquence, that I should come seduce you into fucking me for the rest of my night." Bruce purred at his ear. He gently tugged on Clark's tie until it came loose. The striped cloth fell to the ground. "No lies, no half-truths, just you and me having a heart-to-heart in the most physical way. What do you think?"

"I'd propose that twenty times over and repeat it for the rest of your life." Clark replied, pulling away to see another satisfied grin forming on Bruce's face.

"For once we have an agreement."

The kiss that followed was as heated as it should have been, between the world's two most stubborn men. The ridiculous pair that didn't even know why they waited so long for each other. The pair with genius level intellect that resorted to all sorts of stupid mistakes. Clark pressed up against Bruce, feeling the heat of his skin and the slight trembling of his limbs. Together they stumbled back onto the couch.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Clark breathed into the curve of Bruce's neck. He felt Bruce shift against the cushions of his couch. Then he tilted his head and planted a playful bite on Superman's invulnerable skin.

"Depends on what you're thinking, Superman. I'm no telepath." Bruce's voice was less strained than a few hours back. Clark imagined the mental preparation Bruce had gone through. Bruce must have had plenty of thought before he came to Clark's apartment.

"That we'd take up from where we left off." Clark murmured softly. He tried to find the answer in Bruce's eyes, but Bruce sank into the couch where the shadows hid his expression.

"You think I'd stop here?" Bruce replied in an almost indiscernible whisper.

"Just making sure."

Clark pulled up Bruce's shirt. This time he was able to touch the scars without flinching of surprise. He took his time tracing the evidence of Batman's selflessness. He listened to the stories the roughness of skin told. It was no longer a smooth silicone substitute that his fingers caressed. The imperfection, the human quality, spoke distinctly of Bruce. Clark crushed his body firmly against toned muscles. He could feel Bruce's cock hardening beneath the fabric. Reaching under Bruce's shirt, Clark pinched a sensitive nipple. He squeezed his fingers and watched Bruce part his lips in satisfaction. A soft moan of want escaped his open mouth.

"Be patient." Clark whispered when Bruce arched his hips into the air. It was an invitation for Clark to do as he pleased.

"It's been two weeks. I haven't stopped thinking about you." Bruce growled back. He propped himself up from the couch with his elbows to watch his partner.

"I'm glad to know." Clark gently eased Bruce's pants off. "You shouldn't have avoided me then." The answer didn't come. He smiled knowingly. Then he lowered himself to kiss the spans of skin that he now had privy to appreciate with full attention. He could make out the slight trembling of Bruce's biceps as he struggled to keep his upper back upright. Bruce was sensitive to Clark's kisses on his chest then. Clark was eager to find out what else Bruce liked.

"Lay down," Clark prompted. He helped Bruce take off his shirt. Gently he pressed down on Bruce's shoulders, allowing the man to comfortably support himself. Bruce obliged after a second of hesitation. He settled in and the couch sank with their shifts of weight. The armrest was just high enough for a pillow.

Bruce endured a few more kisses on his chest. Then silently he raised his hand to reach the shirt that Clark had discarded on the ridge of the couch.

Clark paused and looked at him in concern. "You look uncomfortable."

Bruce's eyes lingered on Clark's half-unbuttoned dress shirt. He knew beneath which was perfect invulnerable skin, without a single mark. He shut his eyes and shook his head. "I want this, Clark. God knows I want this, with you and no one else. But..." His voice cracked ever so slightly. His left hand came to a particularly nasty bullet mark. His right hand was still gripping his shirt tightly. Self-consciously he shielded the bullet mark from Clark's view.

"Not with this body… Not after…" He trailed off uncertainly. *Not after Brucie. Not after the beautiful body you laid down with, the flawless body that you could have.*

A glint of pain flashed past Clark's eyes, then they filled with quick understanding. "What will it take for you to trust me?" He pulled Bruce's hand away and laid a kiss on the healed wound. But once he pulled away, Bruce's hand was shielding it again, and more.

"No one wants to bed a monster." Bruce breathed out with apparent disgust.

Clark frowned. He pinned Bruce's wrists to the end of the couch, and watched him sternly. "I love you, Bruce. I always have, even in the years when I didn't know how I felt. I'd be disappointed if you think I'm that shallow of a person." His expression softened. In all sincerity, he claimed, "You're beautiful. More beautiful than anyone I've ever laid my eyes on. Trust me."

The denial and self-doubt in Bruce's eyes stayed for a fair bit more. His troubled thoughts were evident in his halted breath. Slowly they melted into reluctant acceptance. His hand relaxed. Clark pulled his shirt out of his grip and placed it on the coffee table. "That's it." He murmured softly at Bruce's ear. He lowered his hand onto Bruce's crotch. Gently he stroked Bruce's half-erect cock through the fabric of his underpants. "That's better."

Bruce squirmed at his touch. His eyes were on Clark's but his hands made their way down to Clark's trousers. There he fumbled with instinct until he managed to pull the zipper down. Clark was leaking with wetness, his hard cock already straining within the limited space. It demanded release, and once Bruce allowed it, it sprung to full erection.

"Show me that it doesn't matter." Bruce demanded quietly. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing his nerves away. When he opened them again, they were sharp and challenging once more. He fixed his stern gaze on Clark. His fingers touched the hard length tentatively, brushing along a prominent vein. Clark straightened his back in his half-straddling, half-kneeling position. He looked much more in control of the situation compared to the man beneath him. Bruce swallowed slowly. His confidence returned to him as he set his mind to it. "Show me that the sight of me naked arouses you, Clark." He urged. "Prove to me that the wetness from your tip is from the notion of fucking me. That I make you so hard, you'd want to be inside me right now."

Clark looked dumbstruck for one second. Then he released a low growl and captured Bruce's lips with a hungry kiss. It was no longer sweet tenderness that greeted them both. Everything happened with bruising intensity. "Rao, you have no idea." Clark grumbled between their heated exchanges. Their tongues swirled around each other, capturing the slightly bitter taste of saliva. Clark's cock rubbed against Bruce's, skin on skin. With each rhythmic thrust, he smeared his precum onto Bruce's lower abdomen. His hands were already spreading Bruce's muscled thighs. He pulled away slightly, lowering himself to trace his tongue along Bruce's collarbone. His hand sneaked down to find another sensitive spot. As he rubbed his fingertips along Bruce's perineum, Bruce's breathing hitched. He bit back a moan at the new sensation.

"Oh, fuck." Bruce choked out, throwing his head back. His lips were swollen and his voice was close to a whimper. "Fuck."

"You did say you wanted proof." Clark was hard to a point of being painful, but he knew any rash decisions would hurt his partner. He managed to turn and pull open a drawer to retrieve a bottle of lube. It was half-empty, which did bring back some memories. He dismissed them as quickly as they came. With the tense, abrupt reactions he got, Clark figured Bruce would need a generous amount of lube. He poured enough onto his hand and dipped his fingers into the substance. "Try to relax a little."

Bruce's eyes lit up in question. The next second his clarity was cut off by the foreign object that entered him without warning. He groaned aloud and instinctively retreated from the painful intrusion. Clark's hand clamped him down before Bruce could make any further movement.

"I won't hurt you." Clark promised, his eyes sincere. Strong muscles clenched unforgivingly around his finger for a few moments longer. Then they allowed just enough space for Clark to push in. He watched with satisfaction as Bruce's caution dulled into understanding. A few pumps later, the neutral acceptance started warming into desire. Clark thrusted his finger deep into Bruce. He imagined his cock being engulfed in the same warm tightness. But he needn't be impatient. He would have his chance.

Bruce struggled to keep his breathing under control. They came out in sharp exhales, desperate and wanton. He felt Clark's second finger entering him, stretching him from the inside. It was as painful as it was agonizingly arousing. Ultimately, it was the thought of what Clark was preparing him for that made him whimper with need. "More," he gasped. He waited a second, then he felt another finger stretch him and fill him with the same slick substance. He rocked gently with the steady rhythm of Clark's pumps. His entire body warmed with strong, carnal desire. He wanted Clark inside him, and he knew the broken sounds he made were enough for Clark to understand his wish.

It felt like forever had passed before Clark decided that Bruce was thoroughly prepared. A lifetime before Bruce's blatant invitation was accurately conveyed. Then Bruce was pulled back from the brink of completion by sudden emptiness. He opened his eyes amidst his drowsiness. At some point his brain had melted into a useless lump of jelly.

"Bruce." Clark whispered, holding Bruce's chin and gently tilting it towards him. He eyed Bruce's swollen lips with hunger. Clark was pumping his cock slowly, its length slick with lube. His eyes were clouded with lust. "Look at me." He said, his voice trembling slightly. "Tell me it's proof enough that I want you and I love you."

Bruce needn't ask what was proof enough, for the next moment he cried out as Clark entered him in one swift motion. His body quivered at equal parts pain and fulfillment. Clark held him firmly as he thrusted into him, his body warmth a constant reminder of his question. Also indicative of his answer. Clark wanted him. Bruce would be stupid to not believe it then. He shuddered at each movement, when Clark brushed past his prostate. Then he released a loud satisfied moan when Clark hit it squarely over and over again. The desperate pounding of hips found its own rhythm, translating his initial searing pain into mind-shattering pleasure. Bruce would never have imagined this bliss. Never imagined to share this precious lovemaking with the man before him. Never imagined that he had a right to. But it was Clark

who was pumping into him, from slow and tender to hard and desperate. It was Clark who was filling all his emptiness, who was whispering his name in broken gasps at his ear.

"Bruce… God, Bruce…" It was the sweetest sound Bruce had ever had the privilege to hear. He gripped Clark's shoulders, clawing into invulnerable skin with his fingernails. Then he squeezed his eyes shut as he reached his climax. White hot semen spurted out from his cock onto his toned stomach.

In quick following Clark's fingers clawed through the black leather surface of the armrest. He too found release. He buried himself deep in Bruce as he came, pumping every last drop into Bruce's body. Clark almost collapsed onto Bruce when he was done. Still he didn't want to pull out, so he stayed pressed up against Bruce's warm body. Every gentle heave of Bruce's chest beneath him reminded Clark that this bliss was real.

At long last, Clark raised his head to brush his lips against Bruce's. Bruce responded slowly, tenderly, his tongue no longer chasing after Clark's desperately. He did suck lazily on Clark's lower lip, before releasing it with a smirk.

"You know I love you," Clark smiled. He ran his hand through Bruce's ruffled hair. "You drive me insane. No one does that to me."

Bruce responded with a mischievous grin. He pulled Clark close with his hand behind Clark's neck. "Let's keep it that way." They caught each other's lips again and eased into sweet, promising warmth. It was only one of many kisses to come.

The Battle

Clark's life never returned to normal. It only got better.

Sharing a bed with Bruce Wayne was one characteristic of better. Brucie had always slept like he was frozen, and never once moved during the night. Which meant Clark didn't know what to expect when he actually laid down with another six foot two human male. So getting elbowed in the face some mornings was a more endearing but painful aspect of better. Invulnerability didn't mean being utterly painless, especially at around four in the morning.

Besides, who was Bruce to complain about his sleeping posture? The Bat himself flung his limbs against the Kryptonian thrice in one night's sleep. Bruce blamed it on his queen size bed. The following afternoon, Clark found a brand new super king size bed being set up by two delivery men. At least Bruce kept his bed sheets, which he had folded neatly and placed on the entertainment unit. Clark sighed in exasperation.

Bruce returned past midnight after patrol. Except he scooted so far across the middle that Clark woke with a hit on his nose. He opened his eyes to a zoomed in vision of Bruce's sleeping face. Bruce's hand, after sending him that hit, had gone down to touch a newly healed wound. Clark couldn't tell if the wound was itching or painful. He just folded his hand on Bruce's and watched the furrowed brows ease into relaxation. Clark smiled and ran his hand across Bruce's hair. It was still slightly wet from his post-patrol shower. Gently he pressed a kiss on Bruce's forehead. A few minutes later, Bruce snuggled against his chest and whispered his name. The warm breaths on Clark's skin felt ticklish but heartwarming.

Clark supposed love was clumsy and fun, so he got used to those extraordinary wake-up punches.

Every once in awhile, Clark wondered where Brucie had gone. Did he find a home? A job? Someone he liked? Someone he loved? Clark wondered if Brucie had taken Tony's advice and gone all the way to California to meet Jarvis. Maybe he found himself an AI friend. Maybe he found another human that loved him unconditionally in return.

Still, if Brucie didn't contact him, Clark respected that decision. Their time together was over. He just missed seeing his friend.

"He'll get by." Batman said when he found Superman spacing out in the central computer nexus. His hands were still, hovering an inch above the Watchtower console. "A robot worth five million has every state-of-the-art hardware you'd find in North America. He'll function fine in society."

"Physically and financially, perhaps." Superman replied hesitantly. "I don't doubt that he could earn more in an hour than my monthly salary. He'd probably be good at hacking into Russian national security and selling intel back to the CIA."

Batman snorted behind him. "Or stock market investments at Wall Street that wouldn't make him a target for assassination."

"He's… unsuspecting." Superman muttered. "Intelligence doesn't erase his need to learn by experience."

"You can't babysit him forever, Clark."

"Bruce, he's younger than you and me by decades."

"Yes, so was every Robin I've trained." Batman said without skipping a beat. "They don't learn how to defend themselves by staying in the mansion."

Superman shook his head in dejected understanding. "I just don't want him to get hurt."

"He won't." Batman reassured him. His voice was as monotonous as usual, nonetheless Superman heard the caring undertone. A comforting hand rested on his shoulder. "Besides, age is irrelevant. He has an exponential learning curve."

Superman smiled at the rare gesture. "What brought you here? Since you're not the type to casually visit your boyfriend."

"You might want to reevaluate that analysis." Batman bowed down and gave him a chaste kiss. He straightened his back and cleared his voice. "I've been suspecting that there is a security breach."

"Security breach?" Superman's eyes widened. "Someone got past your installations?"

The glare he received was well expected. "They were subtle attempts, and nothing followed… so far."

"Sorry, I was surprised." *And slightly impressed. But there'll be Kryptonite in my bed if I said so.* Superman pulled away from the console and looked up at the frowning cowled face. "What information was compromised?"

"GPS tracking data." Batman explained. "I've upgraded the Watchtower firewall last night. I came to make sure it's working."

"I wouldn't be too worried-"

Batman glared at him. "You're never worried."

"You do enough pouting for the rest of the League." Superman smiled, ignoring Batman's scowl. "There are only a handful of people who can get past your defences. We've got a mountain of strategies against each and every one of them."

Superman got an unimpressed glance. "A handful is enough. Empty flattery gets you a month of abstinence, Superman."

"Why don't you sit down and check your security updates while I give you a back massage?" Superman grinned sheepishly and stood up. He guided Batman onto his chair and rubbed his hands across the Kevlar shoulder pieces. "There you go. Let no one mention abstinence."

"Someone is attempting to retrieve our real-time geographical location. Imagine that happening during a battle. We could be ambushed."

"Well, you upgraded the firewall, didn't you?" Superman pressed his thumb onto the armor, carefully exerting pressure without damaging the material. He felt the muscles underneath relax slightly.

"Any security measure can be hacked by a professional given enough time. We have to remain cautious." Batman looked up at the screen and frowned. "Were those signals there a moment ago?" He didn't wait for an answer. Leaning down, he tapped into the comm link. His voice was again curt and businesslike when he spoke. "We've got incoming in Metropolis."

Superman couldn't see. Not even with however many visions he inherently had. The smoke was blinding him from where he stood, the smell of burning materials strong up his nose. Lex Luthor had discarded traces of Kryptonite around the suburb. It was enough to draw him to the ground by disabling his flight.

How does Lex get his hands on Kryptonite all the time? He thought as he ran towards a collapsing building. The wreck was triggered by two robots knocking down the structural frame at ground level. *How the heck did he manufacture these eight-armed robots with automatic rifles?*

Superman managed to shield a civilian from falling concrete at the price of injuring his leg. Even the midday sun would take a few minutes before it could close the huge gash on his thigh. Losing a few minutes in battle was a matter of life and death.

"Arrow!" Superman called to the only man within viewing distance.

Arrow steadied himself on the rubble and looked back. "Shit, is that a steel beam sticking out of your thigh?"

"The column cracked open at my fist, but the metal withstood my punch." He gritted his teeth and pulled the metal out of his flesh.

"Good timing as ever." Arrow drew his bow and shot at one of the automatic bots that was trying to escape. The arrow sent an electric current into the bot and fried its brain. He fired another, but the second bot caught the weapon and sent it back. Arrow ducked immediately while cursing under his breath.

"They're learning. We need to act fast." Superman staggered to where Arrow stood.

"No shit. I hate artificial intelligence."

"We should disconnect them from Luthor's control." Superman looked around. What bothered him most was the absence of a black-clad figure in his field of vision. "Can you see Batman?"

"You're the one with super senses. I can't see shit." Ollie nocked another arrow in place. "He's probably doing what you're planning. Always sixty-two steps ahead of us, that cheater. How's your leg?"

"I've lost a bit of blood." Superman admitted. His vision was blurry. "I need a few minutes."

Arrow eyed the gash briefly. "I wouldn't say half a gallon is a bit. Just stay within a five yard radius. I'll keep you covered."

"I've hardly lost a quart," Superman mumbled. He pressed harder on the wound. "Incoming on your right."

Arrow gave him a worried glance. He knocked the bot out with an accurate hit and spoke into the comm link, "Superman's injured. I'm with him right now, but someone has got to get rid of that green stuff. It's slowing his recovery."

Wonder Woman's voice streamed into both of their earpieces. "I'm cleaning out the Kryptonite on the edge of the suburb. The bots have me occupied at the perimeter and there are still civilians within my area. Get Luthor when you can."

Arrow switched off the link. "Easy for her to say, I'm blind as a bat."

The smoke suddenly cleared on their west. A remote controlled Batplane hovered above the smoke storm. The strong current of wind started dissipating the particles. Batman crawled up from under the rubble, favoring his left arm as he steadied himself on the ground. Blood dripped off his forearm into a crimson puddle.

Bruce. Superman resisted the urge to fly towards the Dark Knight. He couldn't, and drawing attention to themselves would endanger Ollie. Diana was doing an efficient job at collecting the Kryptonite. His leg was healing. It would just be a few seconds more before he would regain his flight-

Except Batman wasn't alone. The next second the largest bot among all they had seen rose aboveground. Robotic arms slashed across black Kevlar, slicing into flesh and drawing out blood. Batman stumbled back. *Lex.* Superman staggered frantically towards the fallen man. His leg couldn't follow his command, so he fell down a heap of rubble and crashed onto the ground.

Arrow turned at the commotion and saw Luthor's attack. He shot an arrow squarely at Luthor, but it bounced off an invisible shield. A bot came out of nowhere and knocked him off the pile. He overpowered it with a strong kick.

Batman threw a bomb at the same time and disrupted Luthor's course. He applied pressure against the gash on his chest. Luthor's robotic suit froze from electric shock, then it dulled into slow motion. The invisible shield materialized into a fractured force field.

"Now, Arrow!" Batman growled.

The arrow reached a second after the command, penetrating the shield with the sound of shattering glass. Yet just when it was about to hit Luthor's suit, the robot raised its arm and caught the weapon in mid-air.

"Shit!" Ollie cursed. The bot that attacked him a second ago slowed his shot. The bald man behind the glass screen smirked and hurled the arrow straight at Batman.

"No!" Superman launched himself at the pair. He knew he was too far away to steer Batman away. His skin burned as he flew at his highest speed under the remaining influence of Kryptonite. Bruce was too close to Lex. The arrow was too fast. It would be a fatal hit. He felt the constriction in his throat. The pressure on his chest. The numbness of his wound. The agonizing tightness in all his muscles- *No, please Rao, no-*

Then the arrow hit, and Batman collapsed sideways. Except the arrow wasn't planted on Batman's chest, but a man in civilian clothes. The force of the hit blasted him against the wall. His chest sparked with electricity where the arrow had penetrated him from front to back. He wore the same face as the man under Batman's cowl.

Luthor was as dumbfounded as Batman at the sudden intrusion. Then Arrow's attack caught him unawares, and he was thrown to the ground. "Take that, you son of a bitch!" Arrow unclasped the glass shield and knocked the villain out with a punch.

Clark landed next to Brucie half a second later. Liquid was leaking out of Brucie's wound, pooling at his feet. The robot's legs gave way and he sank to the ground with a dull thunk. Brucie was watching Clark with mixed emotions. Emotions that robots shouldn't have, but Clark had never doubted once that Brucie possessed.

At long last, it was Batman who pulled Superman away from the wounded robot. Batman who gently lifted the damaged body onto the Batplane. Then it was Bruce who took Clark's hand and guided him onto the steps, into a cramped space at the back of the plane. Brucie was strapped in, hanging desperately onto the thread that humans called life.

Clark gripped Brucie's hand as tightly as he could, willing the pain to go away. He didn't doubt once that Brucie felt pain as acutely as humans did. For the first time, he wished Brucie wasn't so advanced. He wished the robot didn't have nociceptors, didn't know pain, didn't have emotions. Clark wished Brucie could faint like any normal human, and wake up painless on a hospital bed. Then Bruce came around and pressed an invisible button at the back of Brucie's neck. The robot's eyes dulled and the machinery behind stopped whirring.

"It'll keep him from feeling the electric shock stemming from his chest." Bruce explained. He had taped a white cloth onto his own wound. It was a long but shallow gash, and the blood was drying quickly.

"Can you-?"

Bruce tore off a strip of rubber from a bulkhead and inserted the insulation into the narrow space. But it wasn't deep enough to stop the flowing current between the arrow and the

surrounding metal. He shook his head.

Clark nodded solemnly. He didn't let go of Brucie's hand.

Bruce didn't say a word as they lifted off the ground. They were heading steadily towards Gotham.

The Reboot

"Master Bruce." Alfred stopped at the doorway of the cave. His eyes widened at the body identical to Bruce's in Clark's arms.

"Alfred, get Lucius."

Alfred hesitated for a moment, then he acknowledged the request grimly. He closed the door. Footsteps raced up the staircase.

Clark brushed the dark strands that have fallen across Brucie's forehead to the side. There was no sweat on his skin. "Will he be all right?"

"I don't know." Bruce admitted. He had temporarily disabled all functions on the robot and switched it to sleeping mode. He found a pair of scissors and started cutting along the edge of silicone. "I can't see where the electricity has been cut off. There's a good chance that the arrow has penetrated through the generator. The charged tip might have caused a sudden electricity overflow burning all major organs. Once the overflow reaches the CPU, it's over."

"Like having no blood pumping up to the brain, except it's its reverse." Clark muttered softly. Death and its hideous process were surprisingly human for Brucie's mechanical body. He held Brucie's hand tighter and felt the pulseless touch come back to haunt him.

Bruce worked silently through the outer layer, prying open the wound. The original clasps on the side were burned beyond recognition. He yanked a metal plate open and wiped down a leaking pipe. Wires were pulled apart. Liquid started seeping into places that could not accommodate the least bit of wetness. Along with that was Bruce's sweat. A few drops dripped onto his desktop as his hands worked diligently through the metal mess.

Clark watched helplessly.

Then another voice was coming down the hallway from the open door of the cave. Lucius Fox walked in, holding a bunch of spare components. "Mr. Wayne." He said, announcing his arrival. Alfred had debriefed him on the phone. As he expected, his invention was lying motionless on the table.

The Brucie that got away.

Lucius was about to join in when Bruce held up a hand. "Wait."

Both Clark and Lucius froze, anticipating the worst. Then Bruce pulled another fragment off the robot, and stopped. The frown gave way to raised eyebrows. "I'll be damned."

"What is it?" Lucius came round to the table. He placed his toolbox onto the desktop.

Bruce snorted, in a manner that Clark felt had too much amusement in the situation they were in. Then he pointed at the center of the open body, exactly where the tip of the arrow

punctured Brucie's organs. "Unauthorized A and A. Have a look, Lucius."

"What's A and A?" Clark asked uncertainly. He looked back and forth between the mildly amused man and the astonished one.

"Addition and alteration." Lucius explained offhandedly, his eyes trained to where Bruce was pointing. "And boy is that a good one."

Bruce nodded. "The generator is safe. Have you brought the replacements?"

Lucius unclasped his toolbox to reveal a cluster of components. "You underestimate me, Mr. Wayne."

Bruce traced the thick metal that shielded the arrow half an inch away from the electricity generator. *Triple layered protection with waterproofing.* "Let's get to work then." He pulled on his rubber gloves and donned a pair of goggles. Then he took one last look at the ultimate protector of the robot's heart.

Emblazoned in sharp white paint were the words "Stark Industries".

"G'afternoon, cupcakes for everyone!" Clark waltzed into the Batcave. Two people looked back at his call. One with a characteristically annoyed stare, the other with a familiar friendly gaze.

"Miss me? This one's for you." Clark stuffed a small chocolate cupcake into Bruce's protesting mouth. A hand shot up to hold it before it dropped to the ground.

"Cable three inches to the right of your foot. Step on that and you kill the experiment." Bruce warned with his mouth full of cake.

"There's a concept called tidying up after your experiments." Clark narrowly missed the cable that Bruce mentioned.

"There's an existence called Alfred Pennyworth." Bruce snapped back.

Clark passed by the mechanical body lying on the work table. "There you go." He held up a vanilla cupcake to the other person in the room, who accepted it gratefully.

"Thanks, Clark."

"You're welcome, Brucie." Clark smiled warmly. It had been three months since Brucie's recovery from the battle. Now he assisted Bruce in the Batcave. That is, until his next destination came about. Bruce said it would be soon.

Bruce rolled his eyes at the display. "Get a room, you two."

"Please, who just screamed thirty variations of fuck last night in the master bedroom?" Clark reminded him smoothly. He turned to Brucie. "Do you know why he's always like that?"

Brucie grinned, nibbling on the vanilla cupcake. "How would I? I wasn't the one forcing thirty variations of fuck out of him."

Clark shrugged. "So it remains a mystery."

"Maybe I'm grumpy because *you* gave Stark permission to freely enter the Watchtower for a year."

"You can revoke it." Clark grinned. "He'll complain and sue your company, but he won't actually set foot on League grounds unless Batman gives him permission."

"Hmph." Bruce plucked another chocolate cupcake from Clark's delivery. He threw it in his mouth and grumbled, "What difference would that make? He'll be knocking on glass in front of the control room until we let him in."

"Well, it's about time that we upgrade our acoustic insulation." Clark opened another paper box. "I might have bought a little extra." Those were the sweet fruity flavored cupcakes that Bruce hated. He bought them anyway just to tease a look of annoyance out of his pouty lover. It was one of his guilty pleasures.

"Don't worry about it. We'll be having a guest today." Bruce said.

"Really?" Clark looked up hopefully. "So it's working?"

"Almost." Bruce muttered. He stretched a piece of silicone on top of the workspace and measured its dimensions. "Just the whole gift wrapping part."

"Wait, is that his birthday suit? I don't think I want to see this." Clark said uneasily.

"All robots look the same." Bruce spared a glance at Brucie. "Except the ones modelled after me. They tend to end up on GQ."

"Someone tone that ego down before it shoots through the roof." Three months of lovemaking and Bruce thought he was a sex god. Which was fine, where Clark was concerned. He agreed anyway.

"Don't pretend he wasn't your fuck buddy for a while."

Clark turned to Brucie with a smirk. "He's still holding a grudge, isn't he?" The response he got was a knowing nod.

"I'll fuck this one and then you'll know." Bruce warned gruffly.

He stretched and wrapped the silicone around the metallic frame. Then Brucie came around to help him with the finishing touches. The process took an hour and a half. Most of that time was filled with pointless banters between Clark and Bruce. Occasionally Clark and Brucie exchanged knowing glances.

At last, Bruce wiped the sweat off his forehead and stepped back. "This should work."

"Should I turn on the power?" Brucie asked.

"Wait." Bruce dragged Clark to one side. "We should find a place to hide."

Clark looked at him uncertainly. "We're not watching?"

"Filial imprinting. We want the robot to recognize the first person he meets to be his most desirable mate." Bruce explained irritably. He dragged Clark to a shadowy corner of the cave.

"I can't imagine him not thinking Brucie as his most desirable mate." Clark said defensively.

"Imagine again." Bruce retorted. "Otherwise there'll be three for him to choose from. Among which there's an immortal super-powered alien and his genius inventor slash human father. Are you looking for a love quadruple?"

"No, but genius is on point." Clark grinned. "Thank you for doing this."

Bruce shrugged. "Everyone needs someone. He shouldn't have to live alone."

Brucie watched the two snuggle into a dark corner and nervously pressed the power button. The robot on the table stirred. Fingers clenched and unclenched experimentally. Then sharp blue eyes blinked open. The robot sat up. His features were picture perfect. His appearance was identical to the man who Brucie spent most of his earliest days with. Bruce was especially proud of the spit curl that he gelled with super glue.

"Hi." Brucie came forward, extending a hand. The robot hesitated for a moment. Then he extended his and clamped it awkwardly onto skin made of the same material. "I'm Brucie."

A spark of electricity flashed across the robot's clear blue eyes. He opened his mouth, testing the movement gingerly. Then the syllables rolled off his tongue with surprising ease.

"Hi." The new robot mimicked. A warm smile formed on his face. "I'm Clark."

End Notes

Many thanks to my lovely readers and commenters for the support throughout this fic, I couldn't have done it without you all. Also, my special thanks to ShirinM for first changing my mind about the ending thirteen chapters ago, and that to all who encouraged me to give Brucie the ending he deserved. If you're wondering, I was going to commit murder, so I'm glad I'm now innocent and not dodging rotten eggs.

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